

**PROVINCIAL POLITICS IN COLONIAL
INDIA : ASSAM 1936-39**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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1991

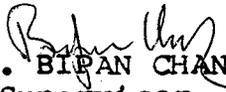


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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled "PROVINCIAL POLITICS IN COLONIAL INDIA: ASSAM 1936-1939", submitted by Ms. NANDITA BARUAH in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of this University, has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other University. This is her own work.

We recommend this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take the opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor Prof. Bipan Chandra and my co-supervisor Mrs. Mridula Mukherjee. It is essentially due to their guidance and constant encouragement that this work of mine was possible. Their guidance enabled me to gain a clear Historical perspective.

I would also like to extend my thanks to my friends R. Gopinath, Renu, Jyoti and Ramana for their constant support. My special thanks to Krishna Anantha for taking time off his own Ph.D. work in order to help me with my corrections and proof-reading. I also take the opportunity to thank my husband Dilip Sarma whose encouragement went a great way into enabling me to pursue my academics. I further thank my parents, who never failed me in my hour of need.

Finally I would like to extend my thanks to all the faculty members of Centre for Historical Studies for their contribution towards enhancing my knowledge. My thanks also to all the staff members in the Centre's office and also in the School's office. Thanks are also due to all the staff members of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, JNU Library and the National Archives.

Ultimately, utmost thanks to Shri Om Prakash who despite severe time constraint has done an excellent job in typing out this dissertation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nandita Baruah', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

NANDITA BARUAH.

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PREFACE

The colonial period in Assam has so far remained a near unexplored area as far as historical studies are concerned, though the ancient and medieval historical phases of Assam's history have received a slightly better attention. The only authoritative work that has been a landmark in an otherwise barren field is Prof. Amalendu Guha's Planter Raj to Swaraj. This book studies the process of political and economic change in Assam between 1826-1947. However, given the long historical span that it seeks to cover, it is more in the nature of a survey and there is still ample scope for detailed historical research on different aspects of Modern Assamese History.

The present work seeks to study political developments in Assam between 1936 and 1939. This period provides a good entry-point for an understanding of Assam politics for it covers three distinct phases; a) the phase of mass mobilisation via the election campaign during 1936-37; b) the period of the non-Congress Ministry from 1937-38; and c) the period of the Congress coalition Ministry from 1938-39. A study of these three phases is likely to enable one to get insights into different facets of Assam's political personality.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with the process by which the Congress came around to the decision to fight elections under the Government of India Act of 1935. The first part of the second chapter discusses the formulation of the strategy for mass mobilisation including via the election campaigns. The second part of Chapter II examines the concrete application of this strategy in Assam, both during and after the election campaign. The third chapter examines the various legislative measures brought before the Assam legislature by both the Ministries as well as the reactions to these, both inside and outside the legislature. The fourth chapter discusses briefly the emergence of various organisations representing tribal, caste and class interests and their relationship with the nationalist mainstream. In the conclusion, I summarise some of the main issues that emerge from the study and advance some tentative generalisations.

CHAPTER I

PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY: THE POLITICAL DEBATE

The policy for granting provincial autonomy to India emerged from the deliberations carried out at the Third Round Table Conference which met in London between 19 November and 24 December 1932. It was at this conference that the final features of the concrete plan for the new constitution of India were arrived at. The government published a White Paper on 12 March 1933 which contained directives on which the new constitution of India was to be modelled. In March 1933, a joint select committee was appointed to consider the government scheme for constitutional reforms in India as formulated in the White Paper. The committee published its report by the end of November 1934.¹ On this basis of this report, a bill was drafted which received the royal assent on 2 August 1935 and came to be known as the Government of India Act, 1935.² The Act was a lengthy document which provided for supremacy of British Parliament, abolition of dyarchy in all provinces, separation of Burma from India and transfer of all provincial subjects to popular control, etc.³

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1. Indian Annual Register (hereafter IAR), Vol.I, Jan. to June 1936, pp.25-8.
 2. Home Department, Political Branch (hereafter Home Poll.) F.51/7/1936.
 3. Home Poll. F.51/9/1936.

But the Act of 1935 did not provide for full fledged responsible government at the provincial level. The Act was invested with all kinds of safeguards in the form of Governor's veto and emergency powers over all acts of legislatures, providing direct British control over the working of the ministry that would come into being with this Act.⁴ The ruling classes of British felt that through this Act, at least for a few decades to come, they had so arranged things that the Indian people while functioning within this new brand of constitution would continue to retain the basic imperialist premise of the Anglo-Indian relationship.

The outward facade of the Act was indeed impressive. For instance, the electorate had been allowed to jump from 7 million to 36/37 million, women were being allowed to vote for the first time, there would be for the first time a ministry of elected members, largely Indians, who would hold charge over most Government activities which touched the life of an average man in his day to day dealings. But if one stepped a little inside this structure then one found that it lacked the very basic provisions needed for the working of a true democratic constitution. There was a leash provided in the form of the governor's veto and

4. IAR, Vol.I, Jan. to June 1937, pp.26-8.

emergency powers. This aspect was strongly criticized by all nationalist-minded people, especially from within the Indian National Congress. The AICC, in its meeting at the 49th Congress session held in Lucknow from April 12-15, 1936, passed a resolution which stated that the Government of India Act, based on the White Paper and Joint Parliamentary Committee Report was in many respects worse than the proposals contained in them. The Congress pointed out that the Act in no way represented the will of the nation and was designed to perpetuate the dominance and exploitation of the people of India. The Congress reiterated its rejection of the new constitution in its entirety.⁵ The Congress in its resolution went on to state that the Congress as representing the will of the people of India for freedom declares that no constitution imposed by any outside authority which curtails the sovereignty of the Indian people can be accepted.⁶ The Congress once more emphasized its demand for a Constituent Assembly based on adult franchise or a franchise as near it as possible.⁷ However, despite the strong reservations with regard to the Act, the AICC decided to take part in

5. Home Poll. F.4/12/1936.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

the election in order to test the possibilities said to be present in the new constitution via the Act of 1935, which the government claimed would enable the nation to move towards independent rule. What the Congress further attempted to gain by participating in the election was to halt the attempt of British imperialism to consolidate its position in the country by seeking the more immediate cooperation of the vested interests in Indian society, and to intercept the Communal Award and other fissiparous arrangements aimed at disintegrating the efforts to move towards national independence.⁸

The programme that the Congress adopted in its manifesto released on 22 August 1936 at the AICC meeting held in Bombay clearly stated its understanding on all major issues that affected the day to day existence of the Indian people, besides clearly spelling out its stance against the imperialist power and the strategy to be adopted in the fight against the imperialist forces.

The manifesto once more reiterated its rejection of the Act of 1935 in its entirety. The Congress manifesto made it clear that the reason for its participation in the election was to carry out as far as possible the

8. IAR, Vol.I, Jan.-June 1937, p.80.

Congress policy of the rejection of the Act and to resist the British government's attempt to strengthen its hold on India and to further exploit the people of India. In the opinion of the Congress, its activities in the legislature should be such as to help its work outside,- in strengthening of the people and in the developing of sanctions which are essential for freedom. The manifesto elaborated that the Congress representatives will work for civil liberties, for release of political prisoners and detenus and repair the wrong done to the peasantry and public institutions. The Congress realised that independence cannot be achieved through legislatures, nor can poverty be removed and unemployment be tackled, nevertheless the Congress placed its general programme before the people so that they may know what it stands for and what it will try to achieve when it has the power to do so.⁹

While the manifesto clearly brings out the Congress disagreement with the Act and the realisation that the Act is nothing more than a democratic facade, it also reflects the understanding that the provisions in the Act could be used for furthering the nationalist cause. At this point, while agreeing to contest the election, it postponed taking any decision on the question of office

9. Home Poll. F.4/12/1936.

acceptance, till the results of the election were out.

The Congress put forward a programme of agrarian reform and industrial development. It spoke for equitable adjustment of burden on agricultural land, reformation of land tenure system and of proper adjustment and assessment of revenue on land. It advocated relief to the small peasantry by reduction in rent and revenue and exemption of rent for uneconomic holdings. With regard to the question of indebtedness, it outlined a scheme which would include the declaration of Moratorium, enquiry for scaling down of debts and the provision of cheap credit facilities by the state. This relief would extend to agricultural tenants, peasant proprietors, small landlords, and petty traders.¹⁰

With regard to industry, it talked of rights of the industrial labourers, to secure for them a decent standard of living, to have fixed hours of work and improved conditions of labour in conformity with international standards as far as the economic condition of country permits. It spoke for setting up of a suitable forum for settlement of disputes between employees and workers, protection against economic consequences of accidents, old age sick-

10. Ibid.

ness and unemployment. It propagated the workers' right to form unions in order to protect their interests. It spoke against differentiation on grounds of sex in any sphere of work and of guaranteeing maternity benefits to women. On the social side, the Congress thrust was on issues like removal of untouchability, caste system, and the social and economic upliftment of harijans and backward classes.¹¹ On the economic plane it outlined a programme for encouragement of khadi and village industries by securing for them special protection.

One of the most radical aspects of the Congress manifesto was its rejection of the Communal Award. To quote: "Even apart from the Act as a whole, the communal award is wholly unacceptable as being inconsistent with independence and democracy, as it encourages fissiparous and disruptive tendencies and strikes at the very root of India's unity." The Congress stated that it would like to end the Award but a satisfactory solution could only be arrived at through the good will and cooperation of the principal communities concerned. It also felt that the only way to fight this situation was to intensify the struggle for independence.¹² Besides, the importance given

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

to the communal problem, though not entirely undue, had very little to do with the major problems of India's poverty and widespread unemployment.¹³

However, once the question of fighting elections on the basis of the existing Act was solved, the other question that came up for decision was that of office acceptance. The Congress Working Committee in its Wardha Session, held on 24 July 1936, had come to the decision that any stand on the question at this stage would be premature and should be left over for the next session.¹⁴

The Lucknow Congress Session further postponed taking any decision on this question, till after the election results came out.¹⁵ Once the results of the elections were declared, the Congress after taking into account the opinion of all the Provincial Congress committees, decided to accept office in all those provinces where the Congress had a clear majority. But this decision too was taken only after certain assurances regarding the working of the Act were given by the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, which have been discussed later in the chapter.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

The Congress decision on office acceptance produced both resentment as well as agreement. While the Congress Socialists were highly critical of the AICC decision of office acceptance, many Provincial Congress Committees reacted favourably. However, some Provincial Congress Committees in which the Congress Socialists dominated felt otherwise. The Congress Socialists in their attack against office acceptance stated: "It is said that the country is not yet ready for decisive action. That is true but the way to decisive action does not lie in the acceptance of office; the most effective method of preparing our people for the struggle is the development of the Kisan Movement...."¹⁶ Conditional acceptance, they felt, would only take the independence movement off the rails, as it was seen by the socialists to be a compromise with the Government.¹⁷

The majority of the PCCs were, however, in favour of office acceptance. Only 6 PCCs, namely Maharashtra, Punjab, U.P., Bengal, Delhi and Assam, were against office acceptance. Bihar, Ajmer, Gujarat, Kerala, Andhra, Nagpur, Mahakosala, Frontier Parliamentary Board, Sindh, Tamilnadu,

16. Editorial by Asoka Mehta, Congress Socialist, Vol.II, 20 Feb. 1937.

17. Congress Socialist, Vol.II, 20 March 1937.

Bombay, Karnataka, and Vidharba were for office acceptance in Congress majority provinces.¹⁸

Coming specifically to Assam, the Provincial Congress Committee had during the campaign for election reached an understanding on non-acceptance of office.¹⁹ This was despite the fact that in the Assam PCC, at that point, there was no left or Socialist group as such. However, the results of the election in Assam forestalled any further discussion on the question of office acceptance, as the Congress in Assam had not got a clear majority though it remained the largest single party. And since the question of coalition ministry was ruled out, there was no question of the Congress accepting office.

But office acceptance did not occur immediately after or as a natural sequel to the election. The Congress High Command decided to go in for office acceptance only if certain amendments were made to the Act. The AICC in its resolution for office acceptance had demanded that the Governor should not use his veto and emergency powers and that the advice of the ministry would not be set aside with regard to constitutional activity.²⁰ The bureaucracy

18. AICC Papers. F.G.39(1) 1936. NMML.

19. Fortnightly Report for the first half (hereafter FR(1)) of August 1936, Home Poll. F.18/8/1936.

20. IAR, Vol.I, Jan.-June 1937, pp.40-5.

at first refused to accept this demand, but as the statutory period for convening of assemblies came nearer and the discipline of the Congress party remained unbroken, attempts to reach a compromise became eager. Finally on 31 June 1937, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, made a statement seeking to interpret the Constitution and its spirit and purpose. He stated that the Governor under Provincial Autonomy should in all matters falling within the ministerial field, including the position of the minorities, etc., be guided by the advice of the ministers concerned. He also stated that it is the duty of the ministers to advise the Governor about the whole range of executive activities which fall within the ministerial field. In all matters where he is not specially requested to exercise his individual judgement, except in areas of special responsibility, it is mandatory upon the Governor to accept the advice of his ministers. Mahatma Gandhi had demanded that in case of political or ideological conflict with the Governor, the ministers should not be forced to resign, but should be dismissed, so that the onus of forcing a Constitutional crisis lay with the Governor. But Linlithgow in his statement pointed out that dismissal was unusual in constitutional practice and he felt that dismissal carried a suggestion of inferiority, which the Government wanted to avoid at all cost. But resignation, Linlithgow pointed out, was more consistent with the self-respect of the ministry and was an effective indicator of the ministry's

In the meantime, on Congress refusal to form the ministry Sir Mohammad Saadullah, a leader of the Muslim group of the Brahmaputra valley, was invited by the Governor to form the ministry. Saadullah agreed to the proposal and formed a coalition ministry with support from tribal and non-tribal interest groups, with the European bloc providing the major support base. The European bloc constituted of tea garden and other commercial interest groups along with certain nominated members. Interestingly enough, the Saadullah faction did not command any clout at this stage among the Muslim groups and organisations in the Surma valley. Here, it was the Muslim Proja party, an offshoot of the Bengal Proja Party, and the Surma Valley Muslim Party which held sway. However Saadullah went ahead with ministry formation and took oath of office on 1st April 1937 as the Premier. With the completion of the election process and establishment of a provincial ministry, the political activities in Assam started moving at a pace not seen hitherto.

How the Saadullah ministry tackled the problems of the province and handled the issues that arose in the year to come and also the role the Congress played first as an opposition, and later in its one-year stint in the seat of power -- these are some of the questions that the

succeeding chapters will dwell on. But before going into the issues and problems tackled by the ministry, it is also necessary to examine how the process of entering into a phase of parliamentary politics was actually worked out and how the political set up was utilized for moving further towards the goal of independence. In fact, the mobilization and the campaign for election was in itself a process of political education for the masses and was utilised as a tool for anti-imperialist propagation.

In the next chapter, it is this process of election campaign and mass mobilisation that would be examined and highlighted. This election campaign was also utilized for establishing communal harmony with special thrust on the issue of Hindu-Muslim unity and Muslim mass contact. How the Congress went about achieving these objectives and how far it was successful is also what the succeeding chapters would be examining.

Thus, whilst the Congress agreed to play the game chalked out by the British imperialist, it tried to set up the rules by which the game would be played and attempted to manipulate it to suit the country's interest in achieving its goal of self-rule.

CHAPTER II

CONGRESS MASS MOBILIZATION: POLICY AND TACTICS

PART (A):

This chapter deals with the mass contact and mass mobilization activity carried out by the National Congress and its subordinate committees during the period under study. For the sake of convenience the chapter has been divided into two parts. In the first half of the chapter the attempt is to trace the formulation of the policy that guided the Congress Mass Contact Programme. The second part deals with a case study of Assam and seeks to assess how far its mass contact programme was based on the policy formulated, and how successful the policy of mass contact was in practice.

The Congress Mass Contact programme was two-pronged. While on the one hand the programme was of mass contact and mobilization in general, on the other hand, a specific attempt was made to establish Hindu-Muslim unity, and Muslim mass contact.

The political differences created on the basis of religious identity by the imperialist powers, through the provision of the Communal Award, made it imperative for the Congress to aim specifically at gaining the co-operation of the minority groups against all divisive

forces. It put further pressure on the Congress to assuage the feelings of the minority group, and guard against any suppression by the majority section of the society. Thus a specific Congress programme aimed at Hindu-Muslim unity and Muslim mass contact was chalked out. This, however, was carried out with greater gusto at the national level.

The Indian National Movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress had passed through various stages of struggle and each stage was marked by different agitational forms, starting from the early constitutionalist to the latter day more radical political programme of non-cooperation, civil disobedience and satyagraha under Gandhi. However, for any of these agitational forms to succeed in achieving its desired goals, they had to be sustained over a long period, for which it was necessary to have a committed, dedicated and disciplined mass following. It was to develop such a mass base that the INC embarked on its mass contact programme, and what better platform could there be, from which to launch this programme than the legitimate arena of election campaign. The Congress, holding the shield of elections, carried out a campaign aimed at creating a political culture among the people, based on aims and objectives with which the people could identify. It was on the basis of these aims

and objectives, that the Congress mobilized the masses and channelized their growing indigenous consciousness (arising out of immediate socio-economic reasons) into a systemized political movement based on the nationalist political ideology.

These political activities under the guidance of a broad based political body, the Indian National Congress, enhanced the growing consciousness of the masses and gave it political shape and direction, so that it would rise up to fight the Imperialist onslaught and free India from its political and economic control. Hence, it was with this understanding and objective, that the Congress embarked on its mass mobilization work.

The decision to fight the election was taken by the Congress at the 49th session of the Congress held at Lucknow in April 1936. It was in the same session that the Congress released its Election Manifesto which has been discussed in the previous chapter. The Provincial Congress Committees were advised to further supplement this manifesto, by adding to it specific demands which were of importance at the Provincial level. But this had to have the approval of the All-India Congress Committee first. The desirability and necessity of establishing mass contact was also voiced at the Lucknow session and was given proper form in a resolution titled "Congress

and Mass Contact".¹ The resolution stated that the "Congress is of the opinion that it is desirable to develop closer contact between the Congress and the masses... to make the Congress a joint front of all anti-imperialist elements in the country."²

It was further decided that in order to implement the resolution the Congress would set up a committee. This Committee comprised of Congress stalwarts like Jayprakash Narayan, Rajendra Prasad, and Jairamdas Daulatram. The job of this Committee was to make recommendations of proposals for mass contact, as well as any proposal for amendment to the Congress constitution as may be considered necessary.³ It was also decided that the Committee would report back to the AICC at the next Congress session. The Congress, in order to organize itself well for the forthcoming election, so as to be able to carry out election and mass mobilization campaign most effectively, set up the Congress Parliamentary Committee on 27 April 1936.⁴ The job of the Parliamentary Committee

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1. Congress Bulletin for the years 1934-36, Home Poll. F.4/12/1936.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

was to look into the possibilities of setting up a suitable machinery for provincial work.

The Parliamentary Committee recommended the following steps for the process of election campaign: (a) In the unitary legislative Provinces, the Provincial Congress Committee should form the Parliamentary Committee for the purpose of organizing elections in the respective provinces; (b) In composite legislative provinces, the Congress Provincial Committees comprised therein should form Joint Parliamentary Committees. In the case of Assam, it was ruled that the Parliamentary Committee should have one nominee from Sylhet.⁵ It further provided that the Congress should contest the seats in both the lower and upper houses vigorously and as far as possible field candidates from general as well as reserved constituencies in order to make the Communal Award redundant.⁶

The Congress Manifesto, which has been discussed in Chapter I, was handed over to all the Provincial Congress Committees who in turn had them translated into the local language after adding to it any provincial issue that needed to be raised. The manifesto was then distributed among the masses in a handy form.⁷

5. Home Poll. F.4/12/1936.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

After setting the machinery for the election campaign rolling, the Congress also set up a Congress Mass-Contact Committee.⁸ The Committee attempted to tackle the question of mass-contact from the grass root level. It decided to first identify the deficiencies, that existed in the local level Committees in the provinces, which were an impediment to mass contact. Once the shortcomings and deficiencies were identified, it laid out a plan to rectify them. The Congress Mass Contact Committee issued a questionnaire to all Provincial Congress Committees, who in turn had to hand it out to the lowest level sub-committee.

The aim of the questionnaire was to enable the AICC to judge the level of Congress contact with the masses, and their response to the Congress programme. The questionnaire was so formulated as to gather information on the working of the lowest level Congress Committees in the province i.e. the Primary Committees.⁹ The idea was to activate the local level Congress organizations and make them share the workload with the Provincial Congress Committees. The questionnaire tried to find out whether the Local Committees discussed the policies, programme and

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

resolution of the Congress and if not how such discussions could be ensured.¹⁰ It was realized that the role of the grass root level committees was not just limited to implementing the orders that came from the top. Their more important job was to gather mass opinion on these policies and programmes. Thus one very important question that the questionnaire raised was, to what extent and in what matters would it be, or is it necessary to consult and take opinion of the subordinate Committees at the local level? Also what constitutional amendment is needed, or suggested for such measures to take place?¹¹

The objective of the Congress at this point was to fully explore the potential of the peasantry and the working class as a mass base for the national movement. For this it was necessary to activate the local level Congress Committees and use their infrastructure to enlist the support of these two classes. It tried to find out the proportion of peasants and workers among the members on the Congress rolls in each district. The question raised was, how can the enrolment of such sections be increased in the Primary Committee. Whether closer association is to be arrived at by (a) direct enrolment, (b) or through

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.



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representation in other organizations in the Congress, or by (c) giving representation to local and independent kisan and workers' organizations in the trade unions and Kisan Sabhas of the Congress.¹² Here again another question arose, whether the representation to such peasants and workers associations would strengthen Congress or weaken it. For there was the possibility of such representation leading to enhancement of class antagonisms in a broad-based nationalist organization where the immediate goal was National independence.¹³

However the AICC did not take any arbitrary decision on these issues. Instead, after circulating the questionnaire and getting the response from the various Provincial Congress Committees, the Mass Contact Committee sat down to formulate a specific, planned programme for mass contact based on the suggestions and answers from the lowest-level committee to the highest Congress organizational body, the AICC.

The Mass Contact Committee in its report and final analysis put forward the following plan and suggestions.¹⁴

12. Home Poll. F.46/26/1936.

13. Ibid. One of the major tasks facing the leadership of the national movement was to impart a common national consciousness to the Indian people and to unite them in a common struggle against imperialism. Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, 1981, p.253.

14. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1936.

It stated that the Congress as an organization has grown over the years and its influence enlarged as a result of the activities carried on by its 'ever increasing' workers. But it was felt that the task of the Congress did not finish at this. The report stated that the aim of the Congress must be to mobilize a much more powerful mass movement to achieve its objectives. For which it must extend and strengthen its organization.¹⁵ The Committee divided the question of mass mobilization and contact into three categories. The first was the extension of the Congress organization and making it more active and alive. The second was to establish a closer association between the masses and the organization of the Congress. The third was to bring the Congress and the organization of the peasants and workers, youth and others, which aim at freedom from imperialism, closer together, so as to make the Congress a joint front of all anti-imperialist elements in the country.¹⁶

Based on the replies received from the various PCCs, the Committee made many suggestions on how to achieve the above mentioned objectives. In order to achieve greater

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

mass contact, it was suggested that the Congress workers should be pressed into service to reach the remotest village and town. Also, the subscription, which was four annas, should either be further reduced or abolished and the formality of enrolment should be made easier. It recommended certain measures to revitalize and activate the Provincial and lower level Congress bodies. It stated that the extension of the Congress organization was a problem which must be dealt with in a more systematic manner from the centre. While local conditions, it was felt, would affect the result, a concerted lead and stimulus was urgently called for.¹⁷ It was felt that most of the lower-level committees of the Congress, particularly the Primary Committees, and members are largely inactive and hardly play any part in determining the Congress policies or in the day to day life of the local people. This was seen to be a problem arising out of the manner in which the Congress was conducting its activities so far.¹⁸

17. Ibid.

18. The Congress Working Committee, it was felt, was quite top heavy with regards to policy matters. The higher committees mainly took the decisions on policy matters, while the sub-committees were utilised for implementing their decisions. The Mass Contact Committee attempted to rectify this. Home Poll. F.46/26/1936.

It was therefore recommended that more initiative should be given to the local Committees and primary members and also that the Congress organizations should take greater part in the daily life of the people. It was suggested that they should be encouraged to meet more frequently and discuss local questions and problems. They further recommended certain changes in the constitution, whereby the questions of general importance could be referred to the subordinate committee and to the meetings of Primary Committees for consideration and opinion.

Thus the aim here was to involve the lower level Committees into the policy making process and via them incorporate the local problems and issues into the larger framework of Congress activity. It was felt that to establish better contact with the masses, the first and essential step was to make the Sub-committees of the Congress more active as they formed a direct link with the masses.¹⁹

It was also realised by the Congress that the constructive work of the Congress was to some extent instrumental in bringing the Congress closer to the masses. It was therefore advised by the Mass Contact Committee to

19. AICC Papers, F.P4(i)1937.

further intensify the Congress constructive work among the masses, by taking up every cause which touches them in their day to day activity and to remedy their problems. Attempts at removal of illiteracy and to deal with oppression of the weaker sections both economic as well as moral, were to be the basis of the Congress Mass Contact programme.²⁰ In order to carry out such a programme, related with the day to day activities of the people, the Provincial and Subordinate Committee's had to take the lead in accordance with the local conditions and needs.

On the question of Congress attitude towards the peasantry and the programme to be evolved in order to establish closer links with them the Committee states, "The peasantry is the backbone of the National Movement, the more the struggle for independence identifies itself with the desire and needs of the peasantry, the greater will be its strength."²¹ The constructive programme, if realised, leaves untouched innumerable problems that the peasantry faces as a class.²² The economic and moral oppression that the peasantry as a class faced at the

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

hands of the stronger landed gentry and the government, could not be negated by the constructive programme of the Congress alone. The exploitation carried on by landlords was mostly illegal, and succeeded because the peasant was totally unaware of his rights. Even when he was aware of it and attempted to fight back, the landlord in connivance with the state machinery used the most brutal methods to curb it.²³

In order to remedy this situation the Committee recommended that the most basic need was to make the peasantry aware of its rights, it must be made conscious of its strength and power and be organized and welded together. In order to enable them to fight against oppression and exploitation, it was necessary to organize them into peasant association.²⁴

The important distinction that the Congress made at this point was the differentiation between Congress Committees, in which varying class groups were represented and separate Peasant Associations. The necessity to establish separate peasant associations was propagated because it was felt that a larger Congress organization

23. Ibid.

24. AICC Papers, F.P4 and P4(i), 1936.

representing varying interests would not be able to undertake the work that a purely peasant association will be able to do. A peasant movement, it was felt, must be founded on the interests of the peasants themselves.²⁵

The Committee recommended a similar policy to establish Labour unions. The working class movement, too, must be based on the interest of the workers and not on a programme imposed from outside. It recognized the revolutionary potential of the working class and the key position it held on the economic front. Therefore a close link between the national, and the labour movement was propagated.²⁶ It, however, stated that for such a link to be established it was necessary for the Congress to come to a joint platform of agreement with the peasant and labour organizations, on a national as well as a local basis, and the time was right for establishing a platform.²⁷

It was on this note that the Committee ended its report, on the basis of which the AICC and the PCCs set

25. Ibid.

26. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1936.

27. Ibid.

out to carry out its programme towards achieving a greater level of mass contact and support. The necessity to involve all sections of the society into the national struggle, in as large numbers as possible, became, during this phase, the main thrust of all Congress policy. The very process of election came to be utilized as a platform from which its mass mobilization programme against Imperialism was to be carried out. How successful this policy was in actual practice will be examined in the second half of this chapter which refers to the specific case of the province of Assam. But before going into that aspect it is also necessary to examine the specific Congress programme aimed at Muslim mass contact and Hindu-Muslim unity.

The Muslim mass contact programme was being carried out by the AICC under the guidance of Pandit Nehru, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maulana Azad and the likes. The thrust of the AICC was to carry out large scale enrolment of Muslim members into the Congress. It was suggested by Pandit Nehru that groups of volunteers should be specially created to carry out the task of enrolment among the Muslim masses.²⁸ It was felt that the general Muslim population was not against the Congress, more likely they were not too well informed about the Congress as a political body.²⁹

28. AICC Papers, F.P1, 1937.

29. Anrit Bazar Patrika, Vol.II, 15 March 1937.

The idea was to carry the Congress programme to this section of the society and make them aware of the activities of the Congress. It was deemed desirable and necessary to issue pamphlets, leaflets and notices in Urdu, specially in the Northern and Central part of India where the language was in greater use.³⁰ The Provincial and Local committees were advised to subscribe to Urdu weeklies and newspapers which were presenting the Congress view point or generally supporting the Congress. These were to be made available to the members as they could help to spread the Congress ideology among the people.³¹

Many all-India level weeklies like the Hindustan and the Al-Jamat were recommended. While the former supported the Congress cause fully, as it was published under the Congress auspices, the latter was a critical supporter of the Congress.³² In order to make these and other Urdu dailies easily accessible to the masses, facilities where these newspapers and magazines were made available.³³

30. AICC Papers, F.P1, 1937.

31. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937.

32. AICC Papers, F.P1, 1937.

33. Ibid.

The All-India Congress Committee had started a separate department for the purpose of Muslim mass contact, which issued various leaflets, pamphlets, etc., for this work.³⁴ This department helped the Provincial Committees also in their work.³⁵ To make the Muslim members aware of the Congress plan and programme all notices were to be published in Urdu, wherever the language prevailed. A notice to this effect was issued by the AICC office.³⁶

In the Frontier region, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan had also launched a programme for assimilation and enrolment of Muslims into the Congress. A Conference comprising of various Congressmen, mainly Muslims, was held in April 1937, in order to discuss ways and means for increasing enrolment of Muslim members.³⁷ The youth took a great deal of interest in these local activities and suggested that Congress offices should be opened in Muslim localities under the charge of active Congress workers.³⁸

34. AICC Papers, F.48, 1937.

35. AICC Papers, F.49, 1937.

36. AICC Papers, F.49, 1936.

37. Amrit Bazar Patrika, Vol.II, 15 April 1937.

38. Ibid.

These and other methods were being widely followed in order to enlist greater Muslim support. These activities of the Congress went a long way in thwarting the attempt by communal groups to overrun the election in their favour and thereby further intensify the communal divide. As an outcome of much of the Congress mass contact activity, political groups which worked on the basis of religious identity could not make much gain in the election. The Congress as earlier stated won the election with a clear majority in 7 out of 11 provinces, whereas in provinces where other vested interest groups came to power, they did so in coalition with various other similar groups.

PART (B):

The level of politicization in Assam and the nature of the Congress organization prior to 1936 was not very highly developed. Further, there existed a definite differentiation in the level of political awareness and activity between the two valleys in Assam i.e. the Surma valley and the Brahmaputra valley.³⁹ The recorded membership figures for the Congress in Assam for the year 1936 are as follows:⁴⁰

39. This aspect would become clearer as the chapter proceeds.

40. Home Poll. F.4/12/1936.

	Rural members	Urban members	Total
Assam	2,388	232	1,620

From the above figures it is clear that at the beginning of the period of study, the main base of the Congress in Assam was among the rural population. The rural membership figures are about nine times that of the urban members. Nevertheless, the figures show that the overall Congress membership was quite low vis a vis the total population, which at this point stood at 92,44,857.⁴¹ But these figures improved dramatically between 1937-1939. For the Brahmaputra valley alone they rose up to 15,646 by 1937 and to 37,321 by 1939.⁴²

Coming next to the issue of differentiation in the level of political activity and organisation between the two valleys, it would not be inappropriate to state that the reason for the greater political activity and better organisation in the Surma valley was that it adjoined and was greatly influenced by one of the politically most active provinces of India - Bengal. Another difference between the two valleys was that while the Socialist bloc was a dominant group in the Surma valley Congress Committee, in the Brahmaputra valley it was the non-Socialist right

41. AICC Papers, F.G59, G60, 1937.

42. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj,^{p 252} Delhi, 1987.

wing Congressmen like Bardoloi, Medhi and Sarma who dominated.

However, the overall level of political activity was quite low in Assam prior to 1936, except in certain phases, e.g. during the Non-Cooperation Movement or the Civil Disobedience Movement. Till 1936 political activities related with the nationalist cause were low-key affairs. An event like the Congress Jubilee Celebration, which was a key event of the year, though celebrated all over the province, did not elicit much enthusiasm.⁴³ Similarly the call to celebrate Independence Day on 20 January 1936 received a poor response.⁴⁴ This lack of enthusiasm is not to be seen as occurring due to the disinterest of the people of Assam in participating in nationalist political activities. But it was more due to the fact that the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (hereafter APCC) as a political body was not a very well organised and efficient unit at this point of time, as has been pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru in his letters to the APCC.⁴⁵

43. Home Poll. FR(1), January 1936, F.18/1/1936.

44. Ibid.

45. AICC Papers, F G50, 1937.

However, political activity picked up in 1936. The Surma valley naturally took the lead. The socialist group was quite prominent in the new political ferment. Attempts were being made by the Sylhet Socialist Party to affiliate the Surma Valley Labour Association to the AITUC.⁴⁶ The Surma Valley Congress Socialists as well as the Surma Valley Labour Association celebrated Labour Day on 1st May 1936.⁴⁷ In fact, the level of political awareness in Surma valley was high enough to enable the Congress to convene meetings to discuss international events. For instance, a meeting was convened to express sympathy with Abyssinia which was facing an imperialist onslaught, and to attack Italy, England and France for their imperialist tendencies.⁴⁸

Once the decision to take part in the election was made clear, political activity became more pronounced in both the valleys. In the Brahmaputra valley attempts were made by the Congress to form a united party representing all shades of political thought to check the manifestation of communal tendencies in the socio-political arena. A conference was called for this purpose at Nowgong on the 15 June 1936 in which the Congress expressed its desire to fight elections along with Muslim political groups from the same platform.⁴⁹

46. Home Poll. FR(2), January 1936, F.18/1/36.

47. Home Poll. FR(2), February 1936, F.18/2/36.

48. Home Poll. F2(1), May 1936, F.18/2/36.

49. Ibid.

The Muslim political groups, however, at this point were not too keen for a united party and instead they proceeded to form their own political party based on religious differentiation.⁵⁰

The Congress attempt to forge a unity was an outcome of the Congress stand of repudiating the Communal Award which the Act of 1935 enforced on the Indian political arena. The aim of the Congress as stated earlier was to wreck the Award by removing the divisions it sought to create along communal lines. However this attempt of the APCC to put this understanding into practice did not yield any result. The Congress in Assam then tried to implement the Mass Contact programme evolved at the national level with special emphasis on mobilising the Muslim masses. But here again in the initial stages it was the efforts in the Surma valley that yielded better results.

In the Brahmaputra valley the effort to establish mass contact and to integrate the peasantry into the fold of the Indian National Congress was being carried out from the top downwards i.e., the Congress Committees made attempts to integrate the peasantry by espousing their cause through a newspaper started under Congress guidance.⁵¹ It lacked a programme for direct contact

50. Home Poll. FR(2), June 1936, F.18/6/36.

51. File No.18/7/36 FR Home Poll; the newspaper 'ASOM Raiz' was started.

with the peasantry and the working class. Surma valley Congress committees on the other hand had embarked on a programme of establishing direct contact with the peasantry and the workers via Krishak Samiti and labour associations.⁵² In the two subdivisions of Sylhet district, Kisan enquiry committees were set up to enquire into and report on the condition of the peasantry.⁵³ They even enlisted the participation of the local Kisan Samiti for election propaganda.⁵⁴ A Peasant Conference was also held in the Surma Valley. Mobilization among the youth was greater here than in the Brahmaputra Valley. By the end of 1936 a youth organization came up in Cachar to discuss the issues relevant for the youth and to work on issues like education schemes for the youth, night school facilities, etc.⁵⁵

In the Brahmaputra Valley, on the other hand, social welfare activities prior to the election were limited. In fact, the pro-election scenario in the Brahmaputra Valley was dominated by the immigrant issue.⁵⁶ In Nowgong district where the immigrants from Bengal formed a considerable part of the agricultural labour population, there

51. The newspaper, Asom Raiz was started at this time. Home Poll. FR(1), July 1936, F.18/7/36.

52. Home Poll. FR (2), August 1936, F.18/8/36.

53. Ibid.

54. Home Poll. FR(1), September 1936, F.18/9/36.

55. Home Poll. FR(2), September 1936, F.18/9/36.

56. Tindiniya Asomiya, 22 January 1937.

was growing Bengali-Assamese tension.⁵⁷ Since the majority of the immigrant Bengali Muslims were being represented in the election by political parties that came up on the slogan of religious differentiation this problem became a major election issue.

However, with the elections drawing nearer, the Congress units in the Brahmaputra valley diversified and expanded their activities. A meeting of the APCC was held in Tezpur, where it resolved to hold an Assam Political Conference in November 1936. They also decided to invite Seth Jamnalal Bajaj and Pandit Nehru to preside over the conference.⁵⁸ The conference however was held only in December and since neither Shri Bajaj nor Pt. Nehru could attend, it was presided over by Bhulabhai Desai. The conference passed various resolutions condemning the 1935 Constitution and resolved to make it a failure. The 'Assam Jubak Sangh', a youth wing of the Congress, was also activated for the election campaign.⁵⁹ Brisk canvassing on behalf of the Congress candidates was carried out. The whole process of selection of candidates, mass contact programme, election propaganda, was being carried out by the Provincial Election Committee under the overall guidance of the Congress Parliamentary body.

57. Ibid.

58. Home Poll. FR(1), September 1936, F.18/9/36.

59. Home Poll. FR(2), August 1936, F.18/8/36.

By now even in the Brahmaputra Valley attempts were being made by the Congress party and its subsidiary bodies to organize labour and peasantry groups and affiliate them to the respective all India organization.⁶⁰ Efforts for enrolment of members were being carried on with large scale canvassing in the districts. Members of the Assam Congress Parliamentary Board addressed a number of meetings in various districts.⁶¹

The general election campaign was based on the Congress Election Manifesto. The focus was on the oppressed condition of the peasant, the inadequacy of the existing land revenue system, the high cost of the administration and the small portion of the revenue that was to be made available to the new provincial ministries.⁶²

The Surma Valley Congress party added to these general demands certain other demands. It demanded that half of the expenditure allotted to the province should be used for the upliftment of the rural sector, whatever sacrifices that may entail of other interests. It further reiterated the Congress demand for reducing the

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Home Poll. FR(1), January 1937, F.18/1/37.

salary of the ministers to Rupees five hundred instead of the Rupees one thousand fixed by the Government.⁶³ Along with these issues which had an all India appeal, the Congress, all over the Assam province, raised a loud campaign against the increasing use of opium in the valley. The Congress resolved to fight the increasing opium addiction and to take all measure possible to eradicate it completely.⁶⁴

It was on these issues that the Congress based its election campaign. However, the election campaign was only a part of the overall campaign of mass contact and mass mobilization. The latter was carried on even after the elections were over and the Ministry formation had taken place. The Congress mass mobilization and mass contact programme was carried out keeping in view the directive of the Congress Mass Contact Committee, an aspect discussed earlier in this chapter.

In the post-election phase the Congress mass contact activity revolved around two spheres. On the one hand, the attempt was to gather support for their labourers in the assembly, for either introducing a progressive bill or opposing a retrogressive one, and on the other, the mass mobilization activities, revolving around

63. Ibid.

64. Political History of Assam, ed., Shibapada De and Bhuya, Gauhati, 1977, p.336.

constructive programmes outside the legislature, were also continued.

The Congress during the first year of provincial autonomy was sitting on the opposition benches. During this period, despite its status as the Opposition, it was able to get many bills passed.⁶⁵ Also, there were certain bills which the minority Ministry tried to get passed, but the opposition from the Congress forced it to send these for circulation to elicit wider opinion.⁶⁶ On such occasions, the Congress used its full force to muster public opinion in favour of its stand. In order to enlist support on issues of legislation the Congress used the media such as newspapers and also its organisational set up, its band of voluntary workers and other members.⁶⁷

During the second year of provincial autonomy the Congress was able to wrest power from the minority Ministry, and it formed a government in coalition with some tribal

65. This is discussed in detail above in the 3rd Chapter.

66. See below Chapter III, p.55

67. The Tindiniya Asomiya and the Satdiniya Asomiya, carried various articles stating the Congress view point.

and other non-communal groups.⁶⁸ While it was in the seat of power the Congress continued its programme of introducing legislation in the Assembly in keeping with its stated programme.⁶⁹ At the same time, it carried on its mass mobilization activities outside the legislature, revolving around the constructive programme.

A variety of issues were taken up for propaganda and mobilisation and a variety of forms were also used for the purpose. As an example, let us take a closer look at the political scene in a district - Sylhet. In early 1937, a meeting of the Congress workers in Sylhet decided to enlist 1,000 Congress members for organizing Rural Committees and also to set up Congress offices at the subdivisional headquarters.⁷⁰ Primary Congress Committees were set up in the Sunamganj subdivision of the district and several krishak samiti meetings were held.⁷¹ Propaganda was carried out by the Congress volunteers to prevent the zamindars from getting cheap labour from outside to reap the harvest. Instead, it was stressed that the locally available labour should

68. See above Chapter III p.71

69. See below Chapter III, p.72

70. Home Poll. FR(1), February 1937, F.18/2/37.

71. Home Poll. FR(2), May 1937, F.18/5/37.

be used even if the local wage rate was higher.⁷² They got the support of the local landless as well as the rest of the poor indigenous population whose labour was available for the harvesting period.⁷³ On this issue, meetings continued to be held by Congress activists.⁷⁴ A youth movement was also started in the Habibganj sub-division.⁷⁵

Further, a no-rent campaign was started under the leadership of Karuna Sindhu Ray, the Congress MLA from the area. The campaign created a lot of tension in the Sunamganj area. The tenants stopped payment of rent in protest against the oppression meted out to them by the officials of the zamindar, who himself was a MLA from the Bengal Proja Party. Karuna Sindhu Ray was soon joined by whole-time Congress workers.⁷⁶

In a letter to Pandit Nehru, Sh. Karuna Sindhu Ray, put forward the Ryot's case and argued the legitimacy of their demand and appealed to Pandit Nehru to pay a visit to Sunamganj on his tour of Assam.⁷⁷ The no-rent campaign

72. Home Poll. FR(2), April 1937, F.18/7/37.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. AICC Papers, F.P4, P5, 1937.

76. AICC Papers, F.P4, P6, 1937.

77. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1937, letter dt. 24 September 1937.

created a great deal of tension between the tenants and the zamindars. The zamindars were forced to form an association to protect their interest.⁷⁸ However, the Congress leadership made sure that the agitation did not take a violent turn.

As a result of this no-rent campaign the Congress Socialists in this case, were able to achieve considerable success in the Local Board election.⁷⁹ Also the increase in the number of Krishak Samiti meetings enabled the Congress to recruit quite a few members especially from the interior Goalpara areas.⁸⁰

In Sylhet political activity had percolated down to the Mofussil level.⁸¹ The issue's discussed were of a wide variety, starting from protests against ill-treatment of prisoners in Andamans, to the cause of Palestine.⁸² In Sylhet alone 45 peasant committees were formed with the combined membership of 2,200 and they were affiliated to the Bengal Provincial Kisan Committee.⁸³ The All

78. Home Poll. FR(2), August 1937, F.18/8/37.

79. Ibid.

80. Home Poll. FR(1), June 1937, F.18/6/37.

81. Home Poll. FR(2), April 1937, F.18/4/37.

82. Home Poll. FR(2), Sept. 1937, F.18/9/37.

83. Home Poll. FR(1), August 1937, F.18/8/37.

India Kisan day was celebrated in the province on 1st September by the Congress.⁸⁴

After the first coalition Ministry was dissolved and the new Congress Ministry under Bordoloi came to power, the Ministry took particular interest in solving the growing tenant landlord tension. The Congress had throughout advocated non-violent resistance. The general instruction to the tenant was not to attack the zamindar physically but to peacefully resist any unlawful demands.⁸⁵

Around this time the Congress activity among the tea garden labour also picked up.⁸⁶ Till about March 1938 very little progress was made among Tea garden labour, owing to the difficulty in obtaining entrance to the gardens. The Tea Estate owners had set up a rule, whereby no outsider was allowed to come into the estates to give speeches, discourses or hold political discussions.⁸⁷ Therefore, the Congress decided that even if their workers were not allowed to go into the estates, they could meet and talk to the labourers when they came out. Thus they started sending volunteers and Congress workers to the

84. Home Poll. FR(1), September 1937, F.18/9/37.

85. Home Poll. FR(1), January 1938, F.18/1/38.

86. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 12 May 1938, Vol.III.

87. Home Poll. FR(2), April 1938, F.18/4/38.

bazars which these labourers frequented.⁸⁸ They also slowly began setting up offices just outside the gates of the estates and then made attempts to hold meetings inside.⁸⁹ They also held demonstrations near Tea Estates, Specially those that were British-owned, in order to attract the labour force.⁹⁰

Once the Congress Ministry came to power the activities among the Tea garden labourers increased. The Congress tried to rectify the prohibition against entering the Tea Estates. It placed the 'Assam Tea Garden Labour's Freedom of Movement Bill' as an official bill. This bill was initially drafted by the Congress during the Saadulla Ministry's tenure but it has not been passed.⁹¹ 'A Sylhet-Cachar Cha Bagan Majdoor Union' was set up by Barindra Dutt a Congress socialist. There were various strikes and protests in the industrial sector against employer's oppression, lack of bonus etc. However, most of the Tea garden strikes were confined to the Surma valley initially, but after sometime the strikes spread to Darrang, Bowai, Lakhimpur, Margherita.⁹²

88. Ibid.

89. Home Poll. FR(2), August 1938, F.18/8/38.

90. Ibid.

91. Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP) 1938, Vol.II, p.346.

92. Home Poll. FR(2), September 1938, F.18/9/38.

Labour protest grew around this time as the general feeling was that since it was a Congress ministry in power it would be better able to solve their grievance and give them a sympathetic hearing.⁹³ The prevalent excitement had even permeated down to the school level and the youth in general. There was great nationalist fervour among the school and college students and many attempted to hoist the national flag in defiance of the school authorities.⁹⁴

It was around this time that the Congress also branched out its activity to the hill areas, as the Congress had enlisted the support of the hill tribes in the Coalition Ministry. District Congress Committees were formed in the Khasi and the Jaintia hills and efforts were made to establish contact in the interior villages. However, since language was a problem and there were not many local volunteers in the beginning, the Congress first established schools to teach Hindi before propagating the Congress programme.⁹⁵ But this inroad of the Congress into the hills initially upset the Khasi. This was because, so far there was little or no social interaction between them and the other Indian communities. They felt threatened by the

93. Home Poll. FR(2), September 1938, F.18/9/38.

94. Home Poll. FR(2), October 1938, F.18/10/38.

95. Home Poll. FR(1), July 1938, F.18/7/38.

Assamese and the Bengalis who had already joined the Congress.⁹⁶ However the Khasi fears were assuaged during the visit of Subhas Bose the Congress president. Subhas in his speech stated "Physical development was a part of the organisation of the nation and salvation, comes through football and not Gita."⁹⁷ This reference to the game of football was made keeping in mind the fact that football was a favourite sport of the Khasis and that since the major population here was Christian they would not have approved of any attempt to force Hindu religious symbols down their throat. After Bose's visit the Congress was able to enlist a good many adherents from among the Khasis. In fact two Garo members of the assembly abandoned their former party affiliations to join the Congress.⁹⁸

Among the women also the Congress activities were finding a strong support base. An association was formed under the Congress auspices in Sylhet with several lady office bearers. The aim and objective being upliftment of young girls from poor families, by giving them proper education and training in vocational subjects - like

96. Ibid.

97. Home Poll. FR(1), November 1938, F.18/11/38.

98. Home Poll. FR(1), January 1939, F.18/1/39.

spinning and weaving. At the same time they were also encouraged to participate actively in propagating the Congress programme.⁹⁹

These activities greatly enhanced the Congress membership in the province. Not only did its numerical strength go up from 15,446 to 37,321 in the Assam valley it gained 1,567 members in the hill districts during the year 1937-38. Once again mobilization activities generated greater response in the Surma Valley, since the Congress had a longer tradition of political activity here and was better organised. In the Brahmaputra valley, however, though the Congress had a long standing organisation, it lacked professional organisational skills. Also since the Surma Valley was more densely populated, the numerical response here was greater. The Brahmaputra valley, on the other hand, was thinly populated and had a far-flung population which made mobilization difficult. Besides, the Surma valley's closer socio-cultural affinity to the Province of Bengal, made it politically more mature, as Bengal had the longest tradition of most active nationalist politics.

What is interesting to note however, is the fact that the areas where the Congress was strong were also

99. Home Poll. FR(2), March 1939, F.18/3/39.

the areas where other political forces especially the left and radical forces developed or attempted to develop. The Communist influence consequently was more prevalent in the Surma Valley. There are many instances where the colonial government's intelligence agencies apprehended youth carrying Communist lithographs.¹⁰⁰ Radical speeches propagating leftist ideology were quite often heard in Kisan Sabha meeting. Besides the Communists, various radical outfits such as the revolutionary terrorist groups, like the Anushilan group, had a strong base in the Surma Valley and they were endeavouring to establish their foothold in the Brahmaputra Valley though without much success.¹⁰¹

One would have thought that the left forces should have developed in the Brahmaputra valley where the Congress activities and organisation were not very deeply entrenched, but it was not so. This perhaps could be explained by the fact that the Congress in the Surma Valley had over a long period of time established a political culture which made the people more receptive^{to} political ideologies of different hues. They were more open to politicisation than their brethren in the other valley.

100. Home Poll. FR(2), March 1939, F.18/3/39.

101. Ibid.

Thus, it was seen that the Congress through its mass mobilization and mass contact programme created a definite political culture in the country, which created a politically active mass base for the long drawn out Nationalist struggle led by the Congress. While examining the case of Assam, we have also seen that the Congress Mass Contact Committee's proposal for creating closer contact, between the Congress and the general masses, including the peasant and the workers, was followed quite closely. In fact most of the mass contact programmes were aimed at activating the two latter groups and enhancing their social and political consciousness with regards to their own strength and their rights. It was this segment of the society along with the general masses which, with their active support and participation, helped sustain the attack on the imperialist forces with the ultimate goal of freedom.

CHAPTER III
ASSEMBLY POLITICS IN ASSAM

Introduction

This chapter deals with the legislative activities of the Provincial Ministries that came to power in Assam during 1937-39. In the first part of the chapter we study the activities of the non-Congress, minority Ministry, and the Congress-led opposition within the assembly as well as outside it. The second part of the chapter deals with the role of the Congress Ministry that came to power in 1938. It also dwells at some length on the question of the 'line-system', and the attempts made by both the Ministries to solve it.

In Assam since the Congress did not have a clear majority it could not form a ministry. It had contested 41 seats out of a total of 108 seats and had won in 33 constituencies. Pitted against the Congress were various other political parties, of class and communal interests, like the Assam Valley Muslim Party, organisations of the Backward tribes and the European commercial interests. Though the Congress was the single largest party, due to the AICC decision to allow only those Provincial Congress parties to form a Government, which had a two-thirds majority, the Assam PCC did not stake its claim for ministry formation. Also, as explained in the previous chapter,

they thought it more prudent at this juncture, not to take up office.¹

This paved the way for Mohd. Saadullah, the leader of the Muslim group of the Brahmaputra Valley, to stake his claim for forming the ministry. He, on the request of the Government, formed a coalition party with the help of the European bloc, Independent Muslims and some tribal interest groups on the 1st of April 1937. The single-minded determination with which the Governor got the ministry placed on the seat of power reflects not just the imperialist power's political leaning towards the class and communal interest groups, but also the Saadullah ministry's political commitment to the European interest group, with which it allied for office.²

Saadullah's five member ministry was dominated by Muslims from different political parties as well as by Independent members. The support of the Muslim League,

1. Home Poll. FR(1), Feb. F.18/2/1937.

2. The Governor before installing the Saadullah ministry did not even consult the Congress groups as per democratic norms and practice in spite of it being the largest single party. Political History of Assam, Bhuyan & de (ed.), Vol.I, 1979, p.337.

which flourished in the Surma valley was however missing. Also, jealousy between groups belonging to the Brahmaputra and the Surma Valley was rampant. The province of Assam was divided into the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma valley. In Surma valley the Muslims were mainly immigrant settlers and were of Bengali origin. Despite the politically motivated support, many of the relatively better-off and educationally advanced Muslims from the Brahmaputra valley were not enthusiastic for social inter-course with the East Bengal settlers.³ Despite religious unanimity there existed a wide socio-cultural gap between the two groups, especially in their economic status.⁴ It was the European group in the Assembly which played a crucial role in maintaining the balance between the Congress and non-Congress groups.⁵

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3. In spite of assertions on the floor of the house that all Muslims are one and have a common destiny, there had never been any definite political unity between the two. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, Assam Muslims: Politics and Cohesion, 1985, p.2.
 4. Unlike the Bengali Muslims, their Assamese counterparts neither practised strict purdah nor had any zeal for Urdu as a status symbol. In addition while Assamese Muslims were mainly engaged in trade and vocation, their Bengali counterpart were agriculturist which increased the former's economic influence though the latter's economic contribution was more decisive in upgrading Assam's economy. Amalendu Guha, op. cit., pp.210-11; Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., p.2.
 5. Home Poll., FR(1)Feb., F.18/2/1937.

As soon as serious business started, the Saadullah Ministry began to reel under heavy attack, and sustained many defeats on the floor of the house. To begin with, the office of Speaker of the house went to the Congress nominee, Basant Kumar Das, and that of the Deputy Speaker went to the Muslim League nominee.⁶ As soon as the session started on 12th August 1937 the ministry sustained a series of defeats. The session began with Abdul Matin Choudhary of the Muslim League introducing the Rates (Amendment) Bill. The Bill sought to amend the Assam Local Rates Act of 1932 which permitted Government to increase local rates to the maximum of 2 annas - 8 pies per Rupee for the annual value of the land. The Ministry intended to rise this provision to increase local rates in Karimganj and South Sylhet subdivision as well as in Sunamganj and Habibganj in the ensuing farming year. Abdul Matin Choudhury's Bill wanted to provide for reduced local rates. This bill was passed with 67 votes in favour of the amendment, and 37 votes against it,⁷ in defiance of the Ministry's wishes.

6. This defeat was an outcome of the Congress-Muslim League alliance as the Muslim League was against Saadullah for not accommodating them in the Ministry. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., p.6.

7. ALAP, 1937, Vol.I, p.229; Home Poll. FR(2) August, F.18/8/1937.

This was followed by the Government's defeat on the question of retaining the two Divisional Commissioners. The assembly voted 63 for and 11 votes against on 17 August 1937 to refuse the entire expenditure on salary and establishment of the Divisional Commissioner.⁸ Even among the public there was a feeling that the Government was not doing enough to cut down expenditure. A series of editorials on "Scope of cutting down administrative expenses", were written in the Tindiniya Asomiya. The newspapers criticized the reversal of the assembly's decision of the assembly regarding cutting down expenses on the Divisional Commissioners.⁹ The House further refused on 26 August 1937, the entire expenditure on supply for the maintenance of the intelligence branch of the CID which had been established to check terrorist activities. This move was unprecedented in any other province and was

8. Though the Speaker in this case gave a ruling that the refusal was in order and binding on the Government. But on government request an extension of 4 months was granted with an assurance that the staff would be discharged on 1st January 1938 by the assembly. However the Governor later asked for another extension and on refusal by the Speaker to admit this supplementary demand the expenditure was validated through the Governor's certificate. On this occasion Bordoloi claimed that the assurance upon which the Congress had against to was the constitution had been supported. Home Poll. FR(I), August, F.18/8/1937.

9. Tindiniya Asomiya, 7 June 1937, 4 June 1937.

yet another heavy blow to the Government.¹⁰

A cut motion criticising progressive enhancement of land revenue was placed in the house on the 19th August.¹¹ Public opinion was also fast growing against the government's reluctance to reduce land revenue. The newspapers attacked the government for not taking adequate measures to reduce the agricultural tax.¹² The public was critical of the Saadullah Ministry for stopping the recovery of agricultural loans in the Cachar district but refusing to do the same for the Brahmaputra Valley.¹³

The ministry in its second session passed the Assam Ministers' Salary Bill, and the Assam Speaker's Salary Bill.¹⁴ The Congress attempts to fix the ministers' salary at Rs.500 and the same for the Speaker was not successful. The ministers' salary was fixed at Rs.800 per month and the Prime Minister's at Rs.2,800. Though the Speaker's salary was fixed at Rs.1000, the Speaker Basant Kumar Das announced that he would draw only Rs.500 as per the Congress decision, since he himself was an erstwhile Congressman.¹⁵ This

10. Home Poll. FR(2), August, F.18/8/1937.

11. IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec.1937, p.241.

12. Satdiniya Asomiya, 26 June 1937.

13. Tindiniya Asomiya, 7 May 1937.

14. ALAP, 1937, Vol.I, p.681.

15. IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec. 1937, p.243.

high rate of salary for the ministers came in for severe criticism and ridicule by the public. Various articles criticising the move were published in the local newspapers. Demands for reduction in agricultural taxes and other welfare programme for the masses, like women's education etc., were growing among the public.¹⁶

Throughout Saadullah's tenure, the opposition led by the Congress made various attempts to introduce progressive bills on the floor of the House. However, not all could be carried through. The Assam Municipal Amendment Bill was introduced by Rajendra Nath Barua of the Congress on the floor of the House. The Bill aimed to remove the great want of the rate payers who considered that official control over the Municipal affairs should be reduced. It aimed at doing away with Government nomination and suggested elected representatives of the rate payers. It also aimed at doing away with the right of government officials to be elected to the municipality, besides reducing the control of the District Commissioner and the Sub-Divisional Officer over the Municipal Board. While the Congress supported the bill and wanted it to be referred to a select committee, the Ministry was against the bill and instead

16. Tindiniya Asomiya, 18 June 1937.

wanted it to be circulated to elicit public opinion.¹⁷ Ultimately on being sent for eliciting public opinion, it was seen that all leading people were against nomination and were in favour of reservation in place of nomination, to protect the rights of the minorities. The Commissioners of both the Valleys also pointed out that nomination was not a fair weapon for safeguarding the interests of the minorities. But the Muslim bloc along with the European bloc continued to oppose it. The Muslim bloc claimed that removal of nomination was not feasible as the question of separate electorate, which was an all India question had not yet been resolved among the national leaders. Thus the ministerialist group pressed for discussion and finally succeeded in getting the bill stalled.¹⁸

The Assam Local Self-Government bill, was another such bill introduced by Sidhinath Sarma of the Congress. The object of the bill was to do away with appointing a nominated bloc in the Local boards of Assam, so as to minimise the control the local bodies of vested interest groups. It also aimed at doing away with the intermediate control of the Commissioners over the local boards, which

17. ALAP, Vol.I, 1937, pp.602-12.

18. Ibid., pp.608-12.

would help the self-governing institutions to expedite business. The final objective was to substitute open voting by secret ballot voting, as this, the mover argued, would give full freedom to the voter.¹⁹ The European bloc was particularly vehement in its opposition to this bill. J.R. Clayton claimed that the bill reflected the Congress mentality of removing all governmental control from Local administrative organs.²⁰ The Muslim bloc was against this bill as the passing of the bill would mean that the control it had over these administrative organs through its nominated members would disappear, and there would be greater chance of the Congressmen getting elected to these bodies.²¹ The Congress and the other opposition parties lost out to the ministerialists on this bill.

The ministerialists tried to introduce the Assam Provincial Legislature Removal of Disqualification Bill.

19. Ibid., p.612.

20. ALAP, Vol.I, 1938, pp.237-38, 277-94.

21. In the Sylhet municipal election (despite strong pressures to postpone the election the government went ahead) the existing board got re-elected while the Congress and others got only three seats. Reports also state that those in charge of the poll were not above suspicion and may have connived with the authorities. Home Poll. FR(1) Jan., F.18/1/1937.

As per the existing Act certain classes of people who were whole time servants of the Crown were disqualified from being chosen as members of the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council. The ministerialists demanded that such disqualification be removed. The Congress however opposed the bill, as it realised that removal of such disqualification would mean that members of vested interest groups like Maujadars, Government pleaders etc., would get elected to the Council and to the Assembly.²² This would mean that the two legislative bodies would be more easily controlled by the imperialists and would serve the imperialist interests more than the nationalist cause. When the motion for considering the bill was put to vote the ministerialists won by 68 votes against 38 with full support from the European bloc and other vested interests.²³ The bill came back to the Assembly in 1938 during the time of the Congress ministry, after the Council had made some amendments. The House then readmitted the bill, after provision was made to accommodate school teachers, professors, lecturers, and part time medical practitioners in Government hospitals, who could now contest elections for the two Houses. The bill was accepted with this amendment as it would provide persons not belonging to

22. ALAP, Vol.I, 1937, p.682.

23. ALAP, Vol.I, 1938, p.948.

any vested interest groups an opportunity to join the two houses. But the bill failed to get passed in the house with the new amendments.

Towards the end of the 1st session a resolution was introduced which nearly led to the collapse of the Saadullah ministry. It recommended 50 per cent land revenue reduction with effect from 1937-38. This resolution was moved by Sidhinath Sarma of the Congress.²⁴ Despite initial support from several members of the Muslim League, the long drawn out debate ended in a defeat for the Congress. The initial support that the members of the opposition, especially the Muslim league, had extended was withdrawn, because the ministerialists interpreted the resolution as a virtual no confidence move against a Muslim majority cabinet. This helped mobilize Muslim support in favour of Saadullah and tilt the balance at the time of the final voting.²⁵

During the 1st session of the Assembly, another crucial question that the Saadullah ministry had to face was that of the Line System. In fact, during the period of provincial autonomy, the Line System was the most crucial issue in Assam politics. The genesis of the Line

24. ALAP, Vol.I, 1937, p.641.

25. Home Poll. FR(2), Aug., F.18/8/1937, Amalendu Guha, op. cit., p.224.

System was an outcome of increased migration into Assam of Bengali Muslims from the overpopulated East Bengal. Immigration was initially a welcome phenomenon for labour short and land abundant Assam from the economic point of view. In fact it was even encouraged by the Assamese landlords. But it soon came to be seen as a threat by the indigenous Assamese, who felt that unless it was checked, their economic and cultural life as well as their majority status in the province would be obliterated. The Muslim population in the Brahmaputra valley had increased from 9 per cent in 1881 to 19 per cent in 1931. The alarming rise in the population also adversely effected the rural economy.

Mass migration in an organised way, and occupation of waste land, grazing and forest reserves in the villages, posed a serious threat to the local tribal population. To restrict this indiscriminate settlement in tribal inhabited land, the officials of the Nowgong District devised an administrative measure known as the Line System in 1916. This was first put into action in 1920. This system led to the classification of land into four categories: (i) those in which immigrants could settle freely; (ii) those in which they could not settle; (iii) a line was drawn to demarcate areas for immigrant settlers and local Assamese people; and (iv) mixed villages for both groups. Although this system succeeded in restricting large scale indiscriminate

occupation, it was not foolproof, due to official apathy. Throughout the period of Ministerial politics in Assam, the Muslim leadership pressed for abolition of the Line System and the indigenous Assamese groups demanded its continuation and even further tightening of it.²⁶ The first meaningful discussion on the Line System in the assembly was in 1936 when Nuruddin Ahmed passed a resolution where, he urged the government to abolish the Line System.²⁷

Once again in 1937 a resolution demanding the abolition of the Line System was put forward by Maulvi Munawat Ali which read as follows: "This Assembly recommends to the Government of Assam that the Line System which is being maintained in some district of Assam valley in order to confine settlement of land for the immigrants in certain areas be abolished forthwith." The mover pleaded for the cause of Indian nationalism, as the Line System, he claimed, prevented transmigration among Indians from neighbouring provinces.²⁸ The demand was supported

26. Amalendu Guha, op. cit., p.256; Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., p.22.

27. ALAP, Vol.II, 1936, p.342.

28. ALAP, Vol.I, 1937, pp.706-17.

by all the Muslim members of the assembly. The Minister for Revenue and Judiciary was against the resolution.²⁹ He tried to point out that despite the Line System, there were still large tracts of lands earmarked for settlement and available to the migrants. He said till the available areas are not exhausted the government should not open up all land to the migrant settlers.³⁰ The resolution was later withdrawn on receiving an assurance from the Revenue Minister that a Committee would be appointed to review the question of the land system once more.

The immigrants' lobby of the legislative Assembly joined the camp of Abdul Matin Choudhury on the distinct understanding that he would work for the abolition of the Line System and give facilities to the Bengali immigrants for protecting their culture and language.³¹ The Bengali Muslim predominance was not at all welcomed by the non-Bengali Assamese Muslims. In fact the Assamese Muslims were strongly against the Ministry's pro-Bengali attitude. They felt that the undue stress

29. Amalendu Guha, op. cit., 1977, p.336.

30. ALAP, Vol.I, 1937, p.63.

31. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., p.3.

on the Line System was an attempt to make Assam a Bengali majority province. They also complained of discrimination against non-Bengalis by the Ministry. They stated that out of 25 scholarships for poor Muslim students only three went to the Assamese Muslims.³²

The Line System Committee when it came up with its report stated that the Line System should not be abolished, as it regulated indiscriminate squatting and protected the interests of the plains tribes. It also stated that no more migration be allowed, but those who had already come should be provided with land and means of livelihood. It recommended the adoption of a larger unit as a demarcation line i.e. a mauza or a village.³³ The Saadullah Ministry did not take any action on the basis of the report, in order to satisfy the sentiments of the immigrant group who provided a solid essential support for its political existence.³⁴ Nor was it in a position to totally abolish the Line System without losing the support in the Legislative Assembly. The Premier thought that even though the Line System did not function

32. Tindiniya Asomiya, 1 June 1937.

33. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., pp.31-2.

34. Ibid., p.39.

effectively in 75 per cent of the areas, it was sacrosanct in the mind of the people of Assam and any thought of abolishing it would arouse much hostility even among the Government supporters.³⁵ Thus the Line System eluded any solution for the time being.

Though the first coalition ministry succeeded in retaining its hold, its position was quite precarious. By the end of August 1937 it became clear that Saadullah would increasingly have to bank on his co-religionists from the Surma valley, for continuing in power. They formed an overwhelming majority in the Assembly and had so far mostly thrown in their ranks with the Congress led opposition. In order to woo the Muslim League, Saadullah attended its All India Annual Conference held in October 1937 at Lucknow. He committed himself to advising his party's Muslim members to join the Muslim League.³⁶ He further reshuffled his ministry, dropped two of his United Muslim party members and added Abdul Matin Choudhary of the Muslim League and Akshay Kumar Das, a constitutionalist belonging to the backward class, into his new ministry.³⁷ Thus the newly constituted ministry was able to mobilise the support of the Muslims and the backward classes.

35. Ibid.

36. Home Poll. FR(1) Sept., F.18/9/1937. Shipopada De and Bhuyan, op. cit., p.345.

37. IAR, Vol.I, Jan.-July 1938, p.229.

However Saadullah's politics of alignment of communal, regional and vested interests could not last much longer. There was a lot of discontentment both within the Assembly as well as outside, due to the ministry's growing communal and regional bias. The ministry was faced with a motion of no confidence, moved by the members of the United Muslim Party. The main criticism was that the ministry had no definite policy.³⁸ The Congress supported the motion but did not participate in the debate. The motion was lost by a very narrow margin of 50 versus 49 votes. There were reasons to believe that considerable amount of money passed hands in the purchase of votes.³⁹ Various cut motions were passed criticizing the government for its failure to repeal the repressive laws, for not introducing total prohibition and its failure to deal drastically with Opium consumption.⁴⁰

The situation outside was also fast deteriorating and turning against the ministry. The ministry was not following any programme of development. It could be seen from the way it functioned that it lacked any will

38. Home Poll. FR(1), Feb., F.18/2/1938.

39. Ibid.

40. Home Poll. FR(2), Feb., F.18/2/1938.

to serve the people. It was also clear that this ministry was totally sold out to vested interests of different kinds. It opposed all progressive legislations that the Congress put up on the floor of the house. There was widespread unrest among the workers in the oil field, collieries and the gardens, as also among the tenants of certain zamindaris.⁴¹

However the coalition ministry's attempts to remain in power without any policy reached them to limit when the Premier packed the Local Boards, during the 1938 Local Boards election, with such nominated members as would side with the Planter groups.⁴² The Congress lost out in this election despite standing a fair chance of winning.⁴³ Thus the mockery of Local Self Government was widely discussed and became a major issue in the anti-Saadullah campaign. There was a protest march against the ministry on 23rd August 1938 organised by the Congress

41. Throughout this period there were many strikes and no rent campaign etc. In north Sylhet no rent campaign under the Congress Socialists had gained some success. The garden labourers were also being organised by the Congress Socialists in both the valleys. Home Poll. FR(2) Feb., F.18/2/1938; FR(2) March, F.18/3/1938; FR (1) April, F.18/4/1938.

42. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, pp.83-6; Amalendu Guha, op. cit., pp.226-7.

43. Ibid.

and certain other progressive political groups and individuals, in which the common masses joined in large numbers.⁴⁴ An adjournment motion was moved by Omeo Kumar Dass of the Congress on 5 September 1938 to raise discussions on the manner in which nominations to the various Local Boards were done in the previous election.⁴⁵ Though the motion was rejected it led to a loss of confidence in the Saadullah Ministry. On 12 September 1938 several No-Confidence motions were moved against the ministry without speeches. Under the circumstances the ministry was forced to resign. Saadullah handed in the ministry's resignation before the discussions had begun in the assembly.⁴⁶

The Ministry had continued in office for more than a year, without doing any significant development or welfare work. The only bill of some national interest that it passed was the 'Prisoners Good Conduct Probationary Release Bill, 1938'.⁴⁷ But here too the release of all the prisoners was completed only under the Congress Ministry. Also the remission in land revenue that the Saadullah ministry granted was not considered adequate. Further,

44. Tindiniya Asomiya, 30 Aug. 1938.

45. Home Poll. FR(2) Feb., F.18/2/1938.

46. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, pp.911-12.

47. IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec. 1938, p.180.

among the Assamese population in the Brahmaputra valley the ministry acquired an anti-Assamese label. Besides this the ministry had also lost the support of the Tribal League due to its inclination towards abolishing the Line System. The Congress was also in the meantime mobilising tribal support against the ministry.⁴⁹ The Congress also pointed to the over representation of the tea planters' interest in the Local Boards.⁵⁰

In the meanwhile the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee leader, Gopinath Bordoloi, had got permission from the party High Command to form a coalition ministry, provided there was an ex-anti-majority in its favour. The Congress had already been successful in enrolling the support of the Tribal League. However, there were some differences between the Congressmen of the two Valleys. These were ironed out with Subhas Bose's help and finally a six-member Bordoloi ministry took oath on 20 September 1938. This

49. The Tribal League came out openly against the ministry for the first time in an article in Tindiniya Asomiya, 11-9-38. Another cause of anger against the ministry was with regard to the lease of commercial and passenger traffic carrier to a non-Assamese Bengali company called the 'Commercial Carrying Company'. The other competitor was 'Assam Motor Transport', which was an Assamese controlled company. This turned not just the tribal but also the Non-Tribal Assamese against the ministry.

50. Tindiniya Asomiya, 11 Sept. 1938.

six member ministry comprised of three Muslims and three non-Muslim members.⁵¹

The Congress Ministry started its activities with various welfare measures. It initiated many relief schemes for the flood effected people in the area of Majule. It introduced various income-generating facilities by providing facilities to weave Endi and Silk. It gave 40,000 layings of pat silk free of cost to many villagers. It set up sericulture production centres with demonstrators in the villages.⁵²

Soon after this the ministry started the job of the disposal of Bill. The session started with the Sylhet Tenancy Amendment Bill. This Bill was introduced during the earlier ministry's tenure. The Bill's basic provision was to grant protection to the tenant. It was meant to regulate the tenant-landlord relationship, and to grant similar provision to the tenants of Sylhet as prescribed under a section of the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, i.e., a permanent inheritance and transferable right of use and

51. The new ministers were Gopinath Bordoloi (Premier), Maulana Mohammed Ali Haider, Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, Khan Bahadur Mohammed Ali, Rohini Kumar Das, Ram Nath Das.

52. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, p.682.

occupation of land, was to be acquired by the tenant who held land for 10 years or more in the temporarily settled areas. The occupant, under this Bill, was to be granted the most elementary and legitimate right of fixity of tenure and a limit to the enhancement of rent. The landlords' rights were also protected by the provision whereby rents were to be secured and the landlords' fees and rights of preemption were continued.⁵³

This Bill was introduced in the earlier ministry by Karuna Sindhu Ray. It was then referred to a Select Committee for discussion after which it was brought back to the Assembly. The members of the earlier ministry had opposed the bill due to certain sections of the bill which they felt were 'revolutionary in character', such as the granting of occupancy right to tenants in town lands.⁵⁴

The Bill when referred to the Upper House was again returned to the Assembly with many amendments. The Assembly after a prolonged debate in which the opposition spoke against the Bill, claiming that it did not satisfy even the modest expectation of the tenants, referred it

53. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, p.226.

54. Ibid., p.185; IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec. 1939, p.1087.

again to a Select Committee. Babu Ravindranath Aditya and Karuna Sindhu Ray from the government side supported the Bill and the motion for referring it again to a Select Committee. They said that the Bill was far more advanced than the Bill submitted by the same member who spoke against it. They said that the sooner the bill was passed the better it was. But, ^{despite} a strong appeal by the Congress, the Bill could not be passed into a law during Congress rule.⁵⁵

The Congress Ministry under Bordoloi introduced and passed the Assam Ministers' Salary Bill, 1938. As per this Bill the minister's salary was reduced to Rs.500 per month with Rs.100 as house rent allowance and Rs.160 as car allowance. This decision was in keeping with the Congress programme and directives.⁵⁶

The Congress Ministry further accepted a private member's resolution regarding increase in pay for primary school teachers. It made a few modifications whereby, instead of increasing the salaries per se, it was decided that the help of the teachers would be taken to spread the Congress programme of Khadi and rural upliftment, in lieu of which they would be given an allowance in addition

55. IAR, Vol.I, Jan.-July 1939, pp.184-85.

56. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, p.742.

to their salary.⁵⁷ The Congress also went ahead with completing the process of release of political prisoners, especially those interned in the Andaman islands.⁵⁸

The Congress had, even before coming to power, chalked out a programme keeping in mind the AICC principles. Their programme aimed to (a) do away with repressive laws, (b) reduce the pay of ministers and the Speaker, (c) endeavour to abolish the Second Chamber, (d) abolish opium consumption and put a ban on its sale except for medical purposes, (e) bring about a remission in agricultural revenue, (f) introduce compulsory primary education, and (g) endeavour to remove indebtedness and other miseries of the peasant. Once it came to power the Congress set about to do all these tasks in right earnest and succeeded in getting many of them completed.

The Congress had got the support of the tribal groups of the plains prior to coming to power. Once it came to power it set about looking after their welfare. The problem of having separate reservation for Plains Tribes had cropped up during the previous ministry's tenure itself. But the earlier ministry had failed to take any decision

57. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, p.862.

58. IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec. 1938, p.184.

in this regard. The Congress Ministry discussed the problem at length. A resolution was put forward by Rabindra Kachari in this regard. The resolution stated while fixing reservation quota for the Tribals a distinction should be made between the hills and plains tribes and both should not be clubbed together. During the debate, Rev. J.S.M. Nicholas Ray pointed out that the level of development between the tribals of the plains and the hills was different. The Government thereupon agreed to make a distinction between the two groups based on their population.⁵⁹

The Congress had introduced various measures to spread education both among tribals and non-tribals.⁶⁰ The Tribal Conference of 1939 stressed the need to strengthen the hands of the Congress ministry as they felt that the tribal interest could only be looked after by them. They felt that other groups only furthered the European and tea-planters' interests.⁶¹

In accordance with the Congress programme, during the budget session of 1939-40, the Congress introduced

59. ALAP, Vol.I, 1939, p.876.

60. Tindiniya Asomiya, 13 Jan. 1939.

61. Ibid.

many progressive bills. First of all, it got passed some of the bills which had been introduced during the tenure of the earlier ministry. One such bill was the Assam Municipal Amendment Bill, discussed earlier in the chapter. In the budget session the Finance Minister Fakruddin Ali Ahmed announced that the Government proposed to bring in five taxation measures immediately, among them being the levy of tax on agricultural income, petrol and lubricant oils, amusement and betting, foreign liquor and other luxury items. The minister said that the levy of tax on agricultural income would bring in an added revenue of twenty five lakhs, out of which the government proposed to spend a portion for the development and welfare of tea-garden labourers.⁶²

The Agricultural Income Tax Bill generated a lot of discontentment and long debates were carried out on this issue. The Agricultural Income Tax Bill would have mainly affected the tea garden owners and large farmers. The Bill proposed to levy a tax on all those with income above Rs.2000 per annum. This brought about a loud protest from the European tea garden interest the Indian Tea gardeners, as well as from farmers.⁶³ After much protest

62. IAR, Vol.II, July-Dec. 1939, pp.250-55.

63. Ibid., pp.250-55.

and debate, the income limit was raised to Rs.3000 per annum. The Bill was rejected by the Upper House, as the nominated members of the house belonged to the income group that the Bill affected. Ultimately, after the Bill was shunted between the two houses for a long time, it was decided that a joint session of both the houses would sit to decide on the Bill. It was here that the Bill finally got passed by a narrow margin of 65 to 64 votes.⁶⁴

The Amusement and Betting Tax Bill was another bill which was passed after a few amendments were made. The Government agreed that no tax would be charged on educational entertainment, charity shows and amusement organised by managements of Tea Estates for the benefit of the Estate labourers.⁶⁵

The Assam Sale of Motor Spirits and Lubricants Bill was passed after making certain clarifications. It was decided that buses and lorries would be taxed at the rate of 2 annas per gallon of petrol and three annas per gallon of lubricant oil. This, it was estimated, would bring in a revenue of Rupees four lakhs a year.⁶⁶ Along with

64. Ibid.

65. ALAP, Vol.II, 1938, p.249.

66. IAR, Vol.II, 1938, p.249.

this the Assam Sales Tax Bill was also passed after an amendment whereby only foreign goods and luxury goods were to be taxed.

The bill that generated maximum public response and appalause was the Assam Prohibition Bill. The aim of the Bill was to ban the sale of opium for purposes other than medical use and to check the licensing of the sale of liquor. The Congress had started an Anti-Opium campaign as early as 1938, which had elicited a great deal of public participation. The Congress named the campaign 'Kani-Bar-Bih' (meaning opium is the greatest poison).⁶⁷ The Ministry set up opium eradication centres to help people get rid of this habit. These social support systems were greatly appreciated by the common man.⁶⁸ The Bill gave the government the right to terminate liquor licences without any explanation. The Congress sent its volunteers all over the province to gather support for the Bill.⁶⁹

All these Bills that the Congress passed were an outcome of the pre-defined Congress policy of rural development, economic progress and education of the masses.

67. Tindiniya Asomiya, 5 May 1938 (Gau.).

68. Home Poll. FR, May, F.18/5/1938.

69. Home Poll. FR, June, F.18/6/1939.

The Congress introduced a further remission in land revenue. It enhanced the 33 per cent remission in land revenue to 50 per cent in case of estates paying Rs. sixteen or less per acre and 30 per cent in case of other estates. However, despite these reductions, the general public opinion in this regard was not fully satisfactory. The feeling was that better agricultural legislation could have been passed, granting greater relief to the peasantry.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding the considerable progress made by the Congress Ministry, as discussed above, an important aspect that had eluded a definite long-term solution even for the Congress was the question of the Line System. This ministry, too, could not initiate action on this problem on the basis of the Line System Committee Report until the period immediately before its resignation. The new Ministry was also hesitant to enforce the Line System Committee's Report as it would have alienated the Muslim support it had.⁷¹ But before it could implement any alternative or modified administrative policy in this regard, the Congress ministry was forced to resign.

70. Tindiniya Asomiya, 28 June 1939.

71. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., pp.64-5.

Before its resignation, however, the Congress ministry decided to adopt the Line System Committee's report in a modified form. This policy laid stress on the aspect of planned settlement of the immigrants along with protecting the interest of the indigenous population. It expressed the Government's determination to evict immigrant settlers from forbidden places, especially from village grazing and professional grazing reserves. The policy of eviction was also declared to be applicable to migrants who had encroached upon or acquired lands which were hitherto prohibited areas constituted for the use of tribal and backward classes. However the ministry also stated that long standing settlers were not to be disturbed. It declared that in settlement of land, preference would be given to those who came before 1st April 1937, i.e., before the provincial ministry came into being.⁷² This declaration of the government caused widespread resentment among the immigrant leaders, who got a platform to voice their dissent in the first session of the Assam Provincial Muslim League conference, held at Ghagamari. On behalf of the immigrants, Maulana Bhasani delivered a highly provocative speech, which stimulated the immigrant Muslims

72. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., pp.331-34; Amalendu Guha, op. cit., pp.261-62, 235-6.

to mobilize themselves under the banner of the Provincial Muslim League.⁷³

But the Congress ministry did not stay long enough to implement its policy as it had to resign. Once the Ministry resigned the Saadullah Ministry came back to power and put a halt to the Congress policy on the Line System based on the Hockenhall Report.⁷⁴

However, during this period this whole question of the Line System and the immigrants went much beyond the scope of administrative measures and policies. Politically it continued to be a thorn in the side of the administrative structure, irrespective of who was in power. But it was the social importance that this whole issue gathered that became a much greater point of debate. The problem of immigration and related issues acquired the status of a full blown socio-political problem during the period of Provincial Autonomy. Though the question

73. Bhasani called for Jehad in the name of Allah to fight against the oppression by the majority. Various meetings were organised by the Muslims in different parts of Assam. Dilip Lahiri and Bimal Dev, op. cit., pp.34-6.

74. F W Hockenhall was the leader of the European party and he had presided over the deliberation of the Line System Committee which submitted the above listed Report in February 1938.

of the Line System and its continuation or discontinuation, was a problem which existed since 1916, it was not until 1936 an issue which was taken up with any urgency, as it was probably felt that raising the issue when the British controlled the Provincial administration through their planters would enlist no change or sympathy. But with the coming of Autonomy, the realisation dawned that the indigenous leadership would be better equipped to deal with the problem, and it would definitely give it more serious attention.

Also, mobilising people and enlisting support under an indigenous leadership at the helm was much easier, as repression and government interference was much reduced. Though in Assam the Ministry initially was a non-Congress Ministry, it was probably still viewed to be less repressive than direct imperialist control.

The period between 1936-39 saw the rise of various organisations taking up cudgels against migration and abolition of Line System. The Young Assam Association (Deka Asom) and the Assam Samarakshini Sabha being two such major organisations. While these organisations were independent of the APCC, there were certain Congressmen who were members of these two organisations. Those

Congressmen who were members of the Assam Samarakshini Sabha, called themselves the Congress Samarakshinite group.

The strange anomaly that Assam faced economically and socially during this time was that while Assam was a large province, it was quite underpopulated and had vast tracts of uncultivated land for which local labour was not easily available. So the initial migration of labour force from adjoining overpopulated Eastern Bengal mainly from Mymensing was quite encouraged. However, once the immigrant agricultural labour started taking over uncultivated land and settling down with families, and also encouraging the migration of friends and relatives, the issue took a different turn.⁷⁵ The Assam Samarakshini Sabha stated the problem in a memorandum to Pt. Nehru, "As a Province, politically Assam comprises of the Brahmaputra Valley, inhabited by the Assamese speaking people, the Surma Valley consisting of the Bengali speaking people and the Hill districts inhabited by different tribes, speaking Assamese as a Lingua-franca. The fusion between the Assamese and the hill people has been going on for centuries. Unity between the major community of the Assam

75. An interview by the author with the Ex-Chief Minister of Assam, Sarad Chandra Sinha, presently President of the Congress Socialist Party, 10th Feb. 1989.

Valley and the Surma Valley on the other hand is inconceivable... Customs, manners, language, culture and religious traditions are diametrically opposite, while historical connection with Sylhet there has been none."⁷⁶

From the above statement it appears that the Assamese middle class and the youth who were at the helm of these organisations were afraid of being socially and culturally overwhelmed by the increasing Bengali immigration into Assam. Their fear of being numerically reduced to a minority was not unsubstantiated. As the census readings pointed to the fact that the Assamese within Assam were not a numerical majority. In the total population of ninetytwo and half lakhs, only twenty lakhs of the population were those who spoke Assamese. Bengalis numbered forty lakhs but this was also due to the heavily populated district of Sylhet and East Bengal which termed a part of Assam. However even if these two districts were to be kept aside the Assamese population numbered 20 lakhs out of a total of 51 lakhs.⁷⁷

The question of immigration was further aggravated by the appointment of a Muslim minority ministry. As

76. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937-39.

77. AICC Papers, F.635, 1937.

stated earlier the issue of the Line System was one which generated a lot of debate in the legislature.⁷⁸ The attempt by some Muslim members to have this provision removed had created a great furore among the Assamese population, both tribal and non-tribal. The fact that the Anti-Line System lobby was backed by the Muslim League gave the problem an entirely different twist.⁷⁹ Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nelamani Phukan stated in the Samarakshini Sabha memorandum, "A purely local and racial question has recently been given a communal colour and the agitation against the Line System is being backed by the All India Muslim."⁸⁰ It was felt that abolition of the Line System would lead to the creation of a vast number of landless Assamese in their own land within any hope of their future development.⁸¹

The pro-Line System lobby quoted the comments and evaluation of the various administrators in favour of their demand for making the Line System more stringent. They quoted the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, Mr. G.R. Pawsay, who had stated, "To allow the immigrants to remain

78. Stated above, pp. 64 of this chapter.

79. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937.

80. AICC Papers, F.P4(1) 1937.

81. Ibid.

would be equivalent to proclaiming that Kachari villages can be occupied by a method of mass rape. The whole case illustrates that boundary lines are needed and that the Kacharis are very much in need of protection which they often fail to get."⁸²

They referred to C.S. Mullan's view on the census report of 1931, that immigration was "likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1920, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation."⁸³

Another demand on similar lines was that Sylhet, which was a deficit district and thus a financial burden on Assam, be separated from the Province of Assam. Also, it was pointed out that geographically and socio-culturally it was more aligned to Bengal and politically it was at loggerheads with the Assamese areas. The Sabha and the young Assam group in their memorandum to the AICC President Nehru put forward the following demands: (a) Sylhet should be separated and transferred to Bengal, (b) total halt of Bengali immigration to the Assam valley for purpose of permanent settlement for a period of 20 years, (c) strict

82. Ibid.

83. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937-39.

naturalisation laws for the Bengali immigrant residents in Assam Valley, (d) outlawing of all anti-Assamese organisations in the Assam valley, (e) moratorium for agricultural indebtedness for a period of 10 years or more and finally (f) abolition of the plantation bloc's reservation in the legislature.⁸⁴ They further stated that if the National Congress did not help the PCC in giving it a clear direction for solving the immigrant problem, then the only alternative left to Assam would be to "get separated from India as Burma had done."⁸⁵

The question in the political arena of Assam at this point was the question of nationalism versus nationality. The Deka-Asomor the young Assam group stated, "How is the Assamese young man to proceed in this crisis?" "No doubt he can, as he has been doing for so many years in the past, join the Congress and fight British Imperialism for bringing in Swaraj to India. But he feels that in the existing state of affairs, the temple of Swaraj, when it is built on the banks of Brahmaputra it will be built on the tomb of the Assamese nation. That is an eventuality he is not ready to face. He has got to find a place for his Assamese nationality under the sun at any cost, within the Congress

84. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937, P4, 1937-39.

85. Ibid.

if possible."⁸⁶

The Samarakshini Sabha in its pamphlet had put forward a similar view. It pointed out that "as a means of saving the Assamese race from immediate extinction a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia had even expressed their minds in favour of secession of Assam from India". This is how the present situation appears to the average Assamese, and they look to you, the National Congress, to help the Assamese to get out of this danger. This time the entire Assamese population have wholeheartedly supported the Congress candidates, on the assurance that the Congress would take up the provincial matters seriously. We want Swaraj by all means, but it is also true that we don't want it at the cost of extinction of our race."⁸⁷

It was at this juncture that the problem stood when the Congress came to power in 1938. With the Congress government at the helm, the hopes of the Assamese middle class of finding a solution had risen. But as stated earlier in this chapter the short duration of one year in power was not enough for finding and implementing a

86. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937-39.

87. Ibid.

solution to this problem. The Congress ministry just before it was forced to resign did formulate a policy (as stated earlier in this chapter) but its implementation was not something it remained to see through.

CHAPTER IV

PROVINCIAL POLITICS VERSUS NATIONALIST POLITICS

The period between 1936-39 saw the growth of various political organisations in Assam whose social base was limited to narrow interest-groups of the society. These political organisations that emerged in the political arena of Assam propagated a contending political consciousness vis-a-vis the nationalist political consciousness of the Congress.

The issue of immigration which has been discussed in the earlier chapter was an issue which created a major impasse in Assamese society and politics. The question of immigration gave birth to various political organizations, led many by a Assamese middle class, which were espousing their cause of Pan Assamese identity. While the Saadullah ministry was in the seat of power, the immigrant question remained an unsolved issue. Not only did Saadullah incur the displeasure of the Congress but also of the Muslim League, because of his ministry's indecision on the question of abolition of the Line System. While the Muslim League opposed the Line System, the Provincial Congress leaders in Assam were in its favour.¹ Thus when the

1. Discussed above in Chapter II, p. 81

Congress came to power it tried to deal with this problem by adopting the Hockinhall report which had laid out a policy for restricting immigration. However it could not continue in power to see its full implementation.²

Besides the political ramifications of the Line System which have been discussed in the earlier chapters, it is the social ramifications which had far reaching impact. To begin with, the advocates of the Line System outside the Congress made this issue out to be one threatening the regional identity of the Assamese people.³ The Assam Samarakshini Sabha and their likes, who propagated the Pan-Assamese sentiment were becoming a vocal political group during the period of Congress rule. Another political organization which was espousing a similar sentiment was the Deka Asom. In their list of political priorities, it was the question of Assamese regional identity and supremacy which came before any anti-imperialist nationalist consciousness.⁴

2. See above, Chapter III, p.

3. Ibid.

4. They talked of secession of Assam, but not with the support of the Imperialist powers. However their support to the Nationalist cause was conditional on the nationalist support to their demand of ascertaining Assamese supremacy in Assam. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1937.

While on one hand, it was the question of the supremacy of a linguistic nationalism that was growing as a contending consciousness vis-a-vis the greater nationalist consciousness, on the other, there were various other political sub-groups which were emerging on the political canvas of Assam representing various segments of Assamese society along economic and caste lines. The All Assam Harijan Sevak Sangh, The Assam Chotanagpuri Association, The Garden Coolie Caste Groups and the Plains Tribes groups were some such groups.⁵ These groups espoused the cause of what were termed as the depressed classes. Unlike the Samarakshinite groups, these groups tried to work within the political framework provided by the National Congress.

The All Assam Harijan Sevak Sangh was set up in Assam in connection with the all India Harijan movement of Gandhi. However, due to lack of proper guidance and negligence on part of the provincial leadership, the organisation and its activities came to a standstill.⁶ The Sangh had established many schools which over the period closed down. However, during the period under study, with the increasing impetus in the political

5. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1937.

6. Ibid.

activities and the growing political consciousness among the masses, the Sangh tried to revive itself.

The secretary of the All Assam Kaibarta* Sammelan made an appeal to the AICC President to help in reorganising the Sangh.⁷ The demand was that the management of the Sangh be entrusted to an officer from the depressed class. There existed among the members of this class an antipathy for the local Congress leadership.⁸ Though they associated themselves with the Congress cause at the national level, at the local level they felt that the Congress leadership was more sympathetic to the demands of the upper castes and were indifferent to the needs and welfare of the depressed classes.⁹ Thus the appeal for help to revive the organisation was directed to the leadership at the national level.

The main grievance of the depressed classes was that despite having very little religious difference with the caste Hindus (they have the same spiritual gurus and observed the same religious customs), they

7. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937-38.

8. AICC Papers, F.P4, P4(i), 1937.

9. Ibid.

* Refers to the fisherman community of Assam.

were called untouchables and debarred from participating in the caste Hindu religious rituals and access to temples.¹⁰ They believed that economically as well as educationally they were far behind the upper castes. They felt that all their problems could be solved through the intervention of the Congress leadership at the national level, as the local leadership was 'indifferent' to their cause.¹¹ With help from the national level Congress leadership, the Sangh opened various primary schools, along with facilities for vocational courses like tailoring, spinning, carpentry etc. These schools were open to all backward communities.¹²

Another major section of Assamese society that organised itself into a cohesive group and set up an association for propagating its class interest, was that of Tea Garden Labour. They formed what came to be known as The Assam Chotanagpuri Association, under the guidance of Prof. P.M. Sarwan who was himself a member of this community. Here too among the members of this community there was a feeling of suppression and neglect not just by British Imperialists but also by the indigenous upper

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

caste segments of the Assamese society.¹³

Once again, though the association with the anti-imperialist and nationalist cause was there but the immediate fight was for the development and advancement in social status of their own peer group.¹⁴ P.N. Sarwan in a letter to Pandit Nehru writes, "I am a Congressman in all except name and the clothes I wear. Our people are not ready to join the Congress. But when they are ready, thousands upon thousands will flock into the Congress fold."¹⁵ From this section of the society, too, the appeal for help was once again directed at the national level Congress leadership.¹⁶

The garden labourers, or the coolies as C.S. Mullan referred to them, formed a sizeable segment of the population of Assam. They numbered approximately 14 lakhs in the total population of 92 lakhs. But despite their large number they were quite under-represented in society. This was largely due to their area of work which was directly administered by British imperialist interests

13. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937-39.

14. Ibid.

15. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937.

16. Ibid.

that is the Tea planters group and also due to the restrictions imposed on them by their immediate employers.¹⁷

Moreover, the indigenous Assamese population lacked a sympathetic outlook towards the problems of this group. They were seen as migrants from outside Assam who could not be assimilated into the Assamese society. The leader of the Chotanagpuri Association, in a letter to Pandit Nehru stated, "along with attempts by American Missionaries to crush our movement and growing political consciousness, it was also the brown bureaucracy which subjected us to all sort of disabilities."¹⁸

However, the Provincial Congress leadership while in the government, did turn their attention towards assuaging the feelings of this section of the society. They tried to assimilate them as completely as possible into the Congress fold by involving them politically into the activities of the Congress.¹⁹ In the Surma Valley, the 'Sylhet Cachar Cha Bagan Majdoor Union' was established by Barindra Dutta, a Congress Socialist.²⁰ The Congress

17. Ibid.

18. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937-39.

19. Home Poll. FR(1) April, F.18/4/1938.

20. Ibid.

at this point also recruited about 200 uniformed volunteers to help in picketing and to visit tea gardens and other labour groups.²¹

The Congress introduced a bill on the floor of the house in July 1938 entitled Assam Tea Garden Labour Freedom of Movement Bill. The object of the bill was to secure right of entry for Congress activist inside the garden premise, which was so far not allowed.²² This Bill was later withdrawn when the Congress Ministry came to power. The government gave an assurance that it would pass its own bill, after discussion with the representatives of the employees and the labourers.²³

Besides these depressed classes who raised their voice for equal social status and economic gains, another organisation that emerged in the political arena demanding improved social status and economic concessions was the Plains Tribal Association. The Plains Tribes in Assam consisted of the Mech, Lalūngs, Mikirs and Kacharis. They numbered about 5,31,450 of the total population of Assam

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Home Poll. FR, Feb., F.18/2/1939.

which was approximately 94 lakhs in the year 1937-38.²⁴ Advancement in education was the main cry of this group. It pointed out the fact that the total population of Assam only 8 per cent were literate and within this group the literacy among the caste Hindus was 61 per cent and the literacy rate among the Plains Tribes was only 3.3 per cent.²⁵ It was felt that unless education of the backward classes is given prime consideration, very little progress can be made towards bringing them into the mainstream political and social set up.²⁶

The other grievance of the Kachari and other Plains Tribes was the easy availability of Opium. The enlightened among this group felt that the addiction to opium of a large section of Kachari and other plains tribes was greatly responsible for their economic backwardness as they squandered whatever meagre income they had to sustain their addiction.²⁷ At least on this front the Congress ministry took strong steps by passing the bill banning the sale of opium.

However the major grievance of all segments of depressed classes in the Assamese society was their non-

24. AICC Papers, F.P4, P4(1), 1939.

25. AICC Papers, F.P4(1), 1937.

26. Ibid.

27. AICC Papers, F.P4, 1937-38.

acceptance into the mainstream of the socio-political set-up. In this regard, the APCC and its leadership was unable to achieve the desired ends at least during the period under study. Regional and sub-regional divisions were greatly accentuated during this period, as the coming to power of a Congress controlled government brought these interest groups to closer involvement with the powers that be and therefore the problems which had so far remained dormant came out into the open with full force.

But here again we find that the Depressed Class Associations and organisations that came into being during this time turned for help and sympathy to the national level Congress leadership and bestowed more trust on them rather than the Provincial Congress leadership. This points to the fact that the local level Congress leadership, though quite active in the anti-imperialist struggle, was unable to gain the confidence of the social sub-groups within Assam.

This could be seen as an outcome of the fact that at the level of regional politics the Congress provincial leadership lent full support to the anti-immigration movement led by the caste Hindu middle-class organisations, like the Samarakshini Sabha. Also the policy on the Line System though appreciated by the indigenous Assamese and

the Plains Tribes, was, however, not in keeping with the interests of the migrant labour group who organised themselves into the Chotanagpuri Association. Their antagonism was more pronounced against the provincial level leadership since as a social group they formed a fairly large segment of Assamese society and were yet not a part of the mainstream. Besides being underrepresented in the legislature.²⁸

But the one important aspect to be noted is that their faith in the national level Congress leadership did help in forming a bond between their limited political activity, revolving around their caste organisation, and the greater movement for national independence led by the National Congress. The Tea Garden labourers, for instance, did join the Congress led anti-imperialist struggle and participate in all the mass movements organised by the Congress, at the regional level.²⁹ This, despite their reservation against the Pradesh Congress leadership.

Thus, though a number of organisations representing local and narrower identities of caste, tribe and economic interest did emerge by this time, they functioned more or less within the umbrella provided by the national movement led by the Congress. Tensions were there at the local level, but these had not yet assumed the shape of unbridgeable chasms.

28. AICC Papers, F.P4(i), 1937-39.

29. Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Having examined some aspects of the Congress activities in Assam as well as the related development of other provincial political forces in Assam, it is now necessary to make an overall assessment of the period under study. To begin with I would first like to comment on the phase of ministerial politics, beginning with the initial reservations of the Congress about the Act of 1935, to the final decision of conditional to office acceptance.

Ministerial politics had various limitations. To begin with the Saadullah Ministry, by virtue of being a minority ministry leaning heavily on the support of the European bloc, was forced to pursue a programme which lacked any progressive perspective. It could only pass those legislations which were not objectionable to its European partners. Thus it could hardly be free of imperialist control.

The Saadullah Ministry also had to do a balancing act between the different Muslim interest groups of the two Valleys, besides trying not to antagonize the indigenous non-Muslim Assamese population of the Brahmaputra Valley. A task in which it did not succeed. The Saadullah

Ministry came in for heavy criticism from the Assamese population due to its overt pro-Muslim stance, especially when it started encouraging and courting the Muslim League. This, and the immigrant problem, on which the Saadullah Ministry failed to take a stand acceptable to the Assamese population of the Brahmaputra Valley, were two of the main reasons for the fall of the Ministry.

Strangely enough despite the Saadullah Ministry's attempt to project itself as a Minority Muslim Ministry, propagating Muslim interests, it was unable to acquire the support of the Assamese-speaking Muslim population of the Brahmaputra Valley. This was because the Assamese Muslims did not have any cultural or social affinity to the Bengali speaking Muslims of the Surma Valley as also the immigrant Bengali Muslims from Mymensing. They identified the Saadullah Ministry as one which propagated the interests of these latter groups. Also, the Saadullah Ministry failed to bring about any legislation which could have assuaged the feelings of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley against being numerically overwhelmed by non-Assamese Bengali Muslim immigrants. This Ministry only further intensified the already existing jealousy between the people of the Surma Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley. Further, by siding with organizations like the Muslim League, it made an otherwise linguistic and regional differentiation into a religious one.

When in 1938, the Saadullah Ministry finally buckled under due to pressures from within as well as outside assembly, the Pradesh Congress took the opportunity to form a Ministry. The coming to power of a Congress Ministry gave a new impetus to political activity in Assam. The Congress in Assam, prior to 1936, was organisationally quite weak. However the election campaign and other mass mobilization activity during this period had greatly enhanced its mass base. Thus, when the Congress Ministry first came to power, the popular sentiment was one of euphoria.

The Bordoloi Ministry was committed to the programme which it had announced during the election campaign. The programme aroused a lot of popular expectation. As has been discussed in Chapter III, the Congress on coming to power tried to pass as many progressive laws as it could. But the one problem that even this Ministry had to deal with delicately was the issue of immigrants and the question of the Line System. The popular expectation was that the Assamese-dominated Ministry which had come to power would now be able to deal sympathetically with this problem, i.e. it would be able to strictly impose the Line System and successfully curtail immigration into Assam.

It was during the tenure of the Congress Ministry that the groups espousing Pan-Assamese sentiment became increasingly vocal in their demands. Not only did the

one year of Congress rule see the increasing political influence of these groups but also of other sub-groups which espoused their own limited demands.

However it would not be inappropriate to state that the period of Provincial autonomy did help to a great extent in politicizing the people of Assam.

The experience of Provincial also helped the Congress in increasing its sphere of influence. It did not in any way lead to the co-option of the Congress into the imperialist fold as alleged by the critics of the Ministerial politics. On the contrary, we have seen that it only helped to enhance the fighting base of the Congress and, though for the short period, gave a limited respite from direct imperialist suppression.

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