



Impact of Government of India Act, 1935 on Electoral Politics and Economy of Colonial Assam

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of Government of India Act was one of the significant event in the constitutional history of modern India. The act was intended by the colonial rulers as a partial measure that would help to defuse the rising nationalist sentiments and it did help to channelize the protest. The operative part of the act of 1935 remained in force till August 15, 1947, when it was amended by independence of India Act, 1947. Though it was a very lengthy and complicated statute, it influenced the electoral politics of all over India. Even Assam was not exception to this. In this paper an attempt has been made to have a look at the importance of the act in the politics and economy of Assam, what was the reactions of the provincial leaders regarding this act and in which way did it affect the overall history of colonial Assam.

KEYWORDS : Government of India Act 1935, colonial Assam, economy, province, governor, India, Congress

OBJECTIVES

- To have a look at the contemporary political-economic situation of colonial Assam.
- To have a look at the provisions of the act and how it was implemented.
- Reactions of the contemporary political leaders and organisations.
- Impact on politics and economy

METHODOLOGY

For this paper data is collected from various books, journals. It tries to analyze the data collected from different sources.

INTRODUCTION

Government of India Act 1935 was one of the significant event in the history of colonial India. The act was intended by the colonial rulers as a partial measure that would help to defuse the rising nationalist sentiments and it did help to channelize the protest. The operative part of the act of 1935 remained in force till August 15, 1947, when it was amended by Independence of India Act, 1947.

This is a very lengthy and complicated statute. It was so because of the facts firstly that it dealt with a highly complex type of federal constitution and secondly that it sought to provide safeguards against misbehaviours on the part of the Indian ministers and legislators. It runs into 321 sections and 10 schedules making it the longest and the most complicated act ever passed by the British Parliament with reference to constitutional reforms in India.

Background

The Act of 1919 could not satisfy the Indians and they still demanded the establishment of the local self government. With this end in view they opposed the Simon Commission and failed to extract any advantage from the round table conferences. But after these conferences the government issued a white paper in which those new reforms were referred to which were to be made in India's future.

There the White Paper Proposals created a lot of controversies and differences and could satisfy none. Hence, a Joint Select Committee was appointed under the chairmanship of the Marquis of Linlithgow, for considering the affairs and give a report on the question of the constitutional form of the government. In November 1934, committee after a hard toil of 18 months produced a majority report according to which there should be an All India Federation should be formed when 50% of the princes joined the schemes. The report of the Joint Select Committee recommended that the safeguards to be provided in the constitution should not, in any way, interfere with the growth of healthy conventions and should be required only during the period of transition. On the basis of this report of the joint select committee, a bill was drafted and was introduced in the parliament which was passed with a few official changes, with a substantial majority.

The bill received the Royal assent on August 2, 1935 and became the famous "Government of India Act 1935".

MAIN PROVISIONS OF THE ACT

The act was a lengthy and elaborate document, dealing as it did with a highly complicated type of federal constitution. The main provisions of the act were

1. Supremacy of the British Parliament.
2. Provincial autonomy
3. Abolition of dyarchy in the provinces
4. All provincial subjects were transferred to popular control. But it did not provide for full fledged responsible government and certain special responsibilities remained intact with the governor as before. The governor, for instance, was vested with the veto power. Further according to section 93 of the Act, he could take over the administration of the province on the ground that the constitutional machinery of the province failed.
5. Bi-chamberal Legislature was established in many provinces including Assam
6. There is no change in the principle of allocation of seats among the different communities and special interests, the communal award as modified by the Poona Pact regulated the distribution of seats.
7. Property qualifications continued to be the main basis of enfranchisement
8. Provinces were made for setting up a federal court to settle disputes between federal government and the provinces

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The act has tremendous impact on the contemporary socio-politics of Assam. When the act was declared many Assamese leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi didn't like some clauses of the act. They feared that due to the rule of provincial autonomy (local self government) could lead to the conflict between the state and the centre in future regarding some matters. He further stated that "History reveals that India is land of unity in diversity. Thrust of freedom struggle and specially the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the political scenario make our unity more powerful. But after independence this conflict would again rise up. Even before independence conflict starts between the centre and the state regarding economy and revenue, distribution, place selection for industry, State and regional language. If we don't solve these questions in proper time, in future it will become a serious issue." 1

In effect the 1935 act did not afford local self government or political autonomy to the hill tribes of excluded or partially excluded areas to manage their local affairs according to their own genius and ability. (Hill areas were classified into 2 categories – excluded areas and partially excluded areas). No political activity of any kind in their district were permitted. There was also no political entity which could voice the people's aspiration. The British superintendent and local chiefs

in most of the district of the excluded areas used to rule the people as virtual dictators. The Iusai Hills, Naga Hills and North Cachar hills were under the excluded area, over which the provincial ministry had no jurisdiction expenditure in these hill areas were also not voted by the provincial legislature because there were no representatives from these hill districts. Not only this, even no federal or provincial legislature intended to the districts automatically. The Khasi and The Jaintia hills and partly excluded areas have 5 representatives in the legislative assembly. But in the Garo and the Mikir hills the franchise was limited to the village headman. Briefly these areas are administered by the state governments subject to the special power of the governor. This act in fact did not change the administrative machinery of the districts...

So after independence there were demands for regional autonomy and better status with the constitutional framework from the tribes of the hill areas of Assam and gradual demand led to the formation of 7 North Eastern States.²

The population inflow became an issue with the introduction of the representation system under the Government of India Act 1935. Political rivalry gradually took on the aspect of a confrontation based on places of origin. Namely Assam and Bengal and a religion namely Hinduism and Islam. On the other hand the Assam State Congress Committee, which was set up in Assam in 1921, claimed that Assam should belong to independent India. On the other hand, the Muslim League, supported by a growing number of Muslims, many of whom were immigrants from Bengal, argued in favour of affiliation with Pakistan. The space became wider, specially when partition became imminent and religious composition of the population of Assam took on greater importance as a factor deciding the future of Assam. While the Congress government banned immigration into Assam, the Muslim League, when it came into power in the province, they ignored previous governments' decision and tried to encourage Muslim immigrants by easing land holding regulations for immigrants from Bengal. (Hazrika 1994 : 58-59, Barpujari 1998: 37-38).³

The outbreak of the world war brought some changes into the act which gave Indian government and the provincial governor huge power under whose pressure it became difficult for the popular government of Assam to maintain its dignity. Gopinath Bordoloi himself admitted that due to this Indian Defence Ordinance the provincial ministry lost its independence. For example without the consent of the ministry Digoiboi region was turned into reserved area. Even the officers of Assam under the banner of the Government of India began to refuse the provincial ministry.⁴

The provincial autonomy under the act did not mean a full fledged responsible government in the provinces. The governors of the provinces, being the representatives of the crown, were vested with the executive power. But they were to discharge their functions with the help of a council of ministers. The provincial autonomy under the act of 1935 did not mean a full fledged responsible government in the provinces. The governors were armed with a set of discretionary powers in the exercise of which they were not bound to consult the ministers. Besides these, they had special responsibilities in the discharge of which they could act in their individual judgement without even consulting the popular ministers who were the representatives of the people. By using his special power the governor took over the reins of administration personally from 25th December 1941 and suspended the legislature.

The discretionary power of the governor proved harmful for Assam. According to rule the parliamentary democracy after the resignation of Sadullah ministry (4th February, 1940) the governor should have asked Bordoloi, the leader of the majority, that if he had the desire for the formation of a new ministry. But in this case the governor used his discretionary power. He allowed Sadullah to form the ministry, where influence of the Muslim League was clearly exposed. This new ministry not only increased power and activities of the Muslim League, but also increased communal unrest in Assam. On the other hand, it became the medium for the fulfillment of the interest of the European community (the planters and the Govt). Again by using his special power the governor announced governor rule in Assam in 1941. It helped the government to raise War Funds without the opposition from the assembly.

The act provides provisions for different communities. The separate electorate on the basis of caste, creed, community not only impured the environment of Assam politics. This system still prevalent in Assam in large or small scale. Even today in Assam, votes and seats are divided in terms of creed and caste.

The act has a deep impact upon the structure of Congress party itself. It was on the basis of this act of 1935, that the Congress adopted the authoritarian attitude, and it was this Congress authoritarianism which in turn, shaped the response of the Muslim League. The Congress Provincial Ministries began to operate as the autonomous governments within federal structure, they accepted the Congress Working Committee (CWC) as the ultimate directorate of unitary government. This was the beginning of a new trend which seriously affected its relation with the Muslim.⁵

The act created autonomous Muslim Provinces which encouraged the Muslim League to convert the process of provincialisation into the process of the establishment of separate sovereign state of the Muslims. After 1942 Assam also witnessed such incidents.

The colonial governments by treating the Muslims as a separate group divided them from the other Indians. The communal politics too certain limit took violent shape in Assam during this period. Peter Hardy has suggested that the constitutional measures not only strengthened the demand of partition in the Muslim majority provinces but also its demand was consolidated among the Muslims of the Muslim minority provinces like Assam. The working of the act and the policies of Congress create a bad situation. Due to the Congress policy of not forming ministry in Assam gave the British and the Muslim League to exploit the situation. In Bengal, the League tried to consolidate their demand by supporting Sadullah who joined League in 1938. Through this, the League made up their mind to include Assam for their proposed Pakistan. This fact cannot be denied completely.

IMPACT UPON ECONOMY

The reforms of 1935 could not provide a large sphere for revenue sources. Bishnuram Medhi says, "The two reforms of 1919 and 1935 did not provide suitable measure for earning of sufficient amount of revenue. Instead of this it increased the economic burden for maintaining the large administration and on the other hand it could not eliminate the property, unhygienic environment, illiteracy, scarcity of food and unemployment."⁶

Through this act, Assam was granted 30 Lacs of assistance per year. From the centre but the centre could get 7-10 Crore rupees from the products of Assam. Centre get 2 crore rupee only from the excise duty imposed upon the oil products of Assam. But Assam got only 6 Lacs for royalty, who had to face fiscal deficit budget during that time. It became an obstacle for economic progress of Assam from all sides and made Assam backward economically. It means Assam became completely and always dependent on the aid of the centre. ⁷

For 1/5 of the total expenditure on the province, the support of the legislative Assembly was needed. But, some related programmes (subjects) were even out of their discussion. So, definitely, there was always a chance that the interests of the ruling class might be worst for the Assamese people.

Again to disturb the Assam's interests and to counter the power of the Assam legislative assembly and to make British rule unquestionable, there was a provision in the act i.e. Assam Legislative Council. Except 4 members, all the other members were elected from very limited community (group). The four members were selected by the governor. The council was run on the revenue taken from Assam government, which was not suitable for the province like Assam, which was undergone some financial crisis. On 10th August, in his budget debate, Gopinath Bordoloi, leader of the opposition, reveals the undemocratic sides of the 1935 act and says, "is there any need of a such budget through which there is no possibility of having a single road in the village area? We have to feed up a foreign army: From 36-50% of total income of the country is spent on them. The economic policy of the country is bide by the imperialist ruler for which rural trade and commerce, industry declines. The governor has immense power, we cannot even discuss about his salary. Why not? In the British parliament the "civil list" of the king is a subject of discussion."

CONCLUSION

The Government of India Act 1935 had a great importance in the political and constitutional history of India. It created bustle not only in the politics of India but also in England. From the above discussions it is clear that this act was enacted for the people of colonial India, so definitely, there is every possibility that this act could not fulfill all the aspirations and demands of the people. But the act remained in action till 1947 and its important provisions were even included in the constitution of India.

After the issue of the act, Assam's politics took a new turn. It indirectly brought some bad signs to the politics of Assam and some of these still seen in our political life. But, later incidents that took place in the politics of Assam which were centered around the act, gave our leaders valuable experience and knowledge to tackle down problems of Assam in the future.

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