

Assam's Contact With The Indian National Congress



Law

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Dr. Chandana Goswami Advocate & Additional Public Prosecutor Naliapool Bazar, P.O. & Dist. : Dibrugarh Assam

ABSTRACT

The paper makes an attempt to highlight the role of the Assamese intelligentsia in the proceedings of the Indian National Congress. That Assam has always been an integral part of the Indian Sub-continent is proved by the participation of the Assamese leaders in the various sessions of the congress. The part played by the leaders of Assam in bringing forth the various problems of the province to a wider platform is highly laudable. The Assamese leaders tried hard to settle the valley's quest for linguistic and regional identity. While western education inspired the intellectuals, the national awareness and a sense of political awakening among the educated and enlightened sections encourage them to get organised and march forward in an attempt to assert their identity.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a new awakening due to the interaction of various forces¹. The most important phenomenon in new India was the growth of a national consciousness which ultimately found expression in the formation of the Indian National Congress. Various factors contributed to the development of this national awakening which was based upon two fundamental principles, viz. the unity of India as a whole and the right of her people to rule themselves². The emergence of various associations and organizations within and outside the province was a clear indication of the general awakening of the people. The series of agrarian outbreaks during the last four decades of the nineteenth century, the growth of English education and multiplication of schools, the development of transport and communication, the development of the press and the renaissance movement of the second half of the nineteenth century – all these contributed to the growth of a conscious national movement for freedom and independence from foreign domination³.

In 1883 Surendranath Banerjee had formed the Indian National Conference to give shape to the newly emerging consciousness⁴. When the Indian Association⁵ endeavoured to establish a national organization during the early years of the 1880's and wanted to give a permanent character to the National Conference, there appeared Allan Octavian Hume, an Englishman and a retired civil servant in the political arena of India with his plan to establish the Indian National Congress⁶. Hume's chief consideration was to provide a 'safety valve' for safeguarding the British rule in India'. To quote him : "A safety-valve for the escape of great and growing forces, generated by our own action, was urgently needed, and no more efficacious safety valve than our Congress movement could possibly be devised". The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was not a sudden event. It was the culmination of a process of political awakening that had its beginnings in the 1860's and 1870's. The year 1885 marked a turning point in this process, for that was the year when the politically conscious Indians, the modern intellectuals interested in politics, no longer saw themselves as spokesmen of narrow group interests but as representatives of a national interest⁸. The nucleus of the Congress leadership consisted of men from Bombay and Calcutta who had first come together in London in the late 1860's and early 70's while studying for the I.C.S. or for Law – Pheroza Shah Mehta, Badruddin Tyabji, W.C. Banerjee, Manmohan and Lal Mohan Ghose, Surendranath Banerjee, Anandamohan Bose, Romesh Chandra Dutt, who all fell under the influence of Dadabhai Naoraji who was then settled in England as a businessman-cum-publicist⁹. The Indian National Congress, the premier political organization of the Indian people, held its first session political organization of the Indian people, held its first session in Bombay in 1885, it was attended by almost all outstanding leaders of Indian nationalism¹⁰, The Liberal intelligentsia who dominated the Congress from 1885 to 1905 were the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement in the first

phase¹¹.

Assam's Contact with the Congress :

With the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which was a milestone in the history of the national movement in India, the political consciousness of the Assamese intellectuals received a definite orientation¹². The formation of the Indian National Conference was the culmination of a process that had begun almost thirty years earlier in different parts of India, from the time of the Revolt of 1857. The western educated Indian elite belonging to various linguistic and regional groups, had infused new ideas of regional consciousness into their respective areas of influence before they began to think in terms of a larger Indian consciousness. Most of the Assamese, Bengali or Gujarati intellectuals who took up the leadership in moulding the group consciousness of their respective regions in the nineteenth century, were also spokesmen for the nascent Indian nationalism of the period¹³.

In Orissa Phakirmohan Senapati (1843-1918), Radhanath Ray (1848-1912) were the spokesmen of Oriyan nationalism¹⁴. In Gujarat Narmada Shankar (1833-86) and others initiated the "Asmita" movement which was an embodiment of Gujarat national self-consciousness¹⁵. In Bengal the 'nationalism' of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94), Ranjarain Bose (1826-99) and even of Chitta Ranjan Das (1870-1925) was the beginning of Bengali nationalism¹⁶. Rajnarain Bose who founded the *Jatiya Gaurav Sampadini Sabha* in Bengali in 1860 was motivated primarily to rouse the "national feeling" among the Hindu Bengalis¹⁷. Even more explicit was Chitta Ranjan Das in his espousal of the cause of Bengali nationalism¹⁸. Das expressed clearly his hopes of seeing "the time when the Bengali nation will rise and stand in all its glory"¹⁹.

Assam's participation and the part she played in the national struggle from time to time, are a landmark in history²⁰. Though till 1921 there was in Assam no separate organization of the Indian National Congress representatives from Assam used to attend the sessions of the Congress since its inception in 1885 and took active part in its deliberations²¹. It appears that the first meeting of the National Conference that preceded the Indian National Congress was attended by delegates from Tezpur and Sylhet²². In Assam the later years of the nineteenth century and the early two decades of the twentieth century were dominated by several organizations like the *Ryot Sabhas*, the *Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha* and the Assam Association, Delegates from these bodies attended some of the early sessions of the National Congress. The Assam Association later merged with the Congress in 1921 when the Provincial Congress Committee was formed in Assam²³. The first session of the Congress held at Bombay (Mumbai) in 1885 was mostly a 'Congress of volunteers'²⁴. A public meeting held at Guwahati under the presidency of Anandamohan Bose passed a resolution supporting the aims and objectives of the Congress.

A telegram was also sent to the convenors wishing it all success²⁵.

The second session of the Congress (1886) held at Calcutta (now Kolkata) was of a different character. This Congress was attended by representatives of various associations and delegates duly elected at public meetings in different provinces. Devicharan Baruah and Gopinath Bardoloi represented the Upper Assam Association, Shillong Association was represented by Kalikanta Barkakati while Satyanath Bora represented the Nagaon *Ryot* Association. From the Surma valley Bipin Chandra Pal, represented the Sylhet Association, Joy Gobinda Shome and Kamini Kumar Chanda, represented the Habiganj Peoples' Association²⁶, while Dinanath Dutta, Manager, C.N. Joint Stock Company, Cachar attended the said session in his individual capacity²⁷. In the third session (1887) held at Madras (Chennai) the following representatives from Assam were present – Radhanath Changkakati from Upper Assam Association, Lakshmikanta Barkakati from Assam Conference and Bipin Chandra Pal as the editor of the *Tribune*²⁸. The fourth session of the National Congress held at Allahabad (1888) was attended by Ghanashyam Baruah as a representative of the Nagaon *Ryot Sabha*, Harendranarayan Singh Chowdhury, *Zamindar of* Bagaribari, Ramchandra, a merchant from Shillong and Bipin Chandra Pal who was formally elected to be a delegate to the Congress in Public meetings at Shillong and Sylhet²⁹. The fifth session of the Congress held at Bombay in 1889 was attended by Haridas Roy from Dibrugarh and Bipin Chandra Pal from Sylhet³⁰. The sixth session of the Congress held in 1890 at Calcutta was attended by Manik Chandra Barooah from Assam and Bipin Chandra Pal and Barada Haldar from Sylhet³¹. The seventh session held at Nagpur in 1891 was attended by Meghnath Banerjee, a medical practitioner of Dibrugarh and Durganath Roy of Dhubri³². In the Allahabad session of 1892, the eighth session of the Congress, Bholanath Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Radhanath Changkakati from Assam were present³³. Hariprasad Nath, a *mukhtear* or Goalpara attended the Congress session of 1901 held at Calcutta. Lakshminath Bezbaruah also attended a few subsequent sessions of the Congress held in 1903 and 1904 as a representative of the Jorhat *Sarbojanik Sabha*. The 1904 session of the Congress was attended by Chandrakamal Bezbaruah, a tea planter of Jorhat and Bhabani Kanta, a pleader of Dhubri. Similarly, delegates from the Surma valley also attended most of these sessions during the years 1885-1905. Bipin Chandra Pal, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Sundarimohan Das and Ramani Mohan Das were the most prominent among them³⁴.

Role of the Assam Leaders :

The representatives from Assam were not silent observers, some of them actively participated in the proceedings of the Congress³⁵. The early congress sessions created an enthusiasm among the middle classes throughout Assam. For instance, on 16 December, 1886, there was a largely attended public meeting at Murarichand College at Sylhet. The meeting resolved that it had become necessary, in the interests of India and England alike, to reconstitute the legislative councils with no less than two-third members elected by local bodies and that the council thus formed have the right of interpellation. It also demanded that the maximum age of a candidate for the Indian Civil Service Examination be raised to 23 years and that the said examination be held simultaneously in India and England³⁶. The Chairman of a public meeting in Shillong and the Indian Committee of Dibrugarh sent greeting telegrams to the 1886 Congress session. The achievement of this session was reviewed in *Mou* in its February, 1887 issue. It was commented that as there were numerous important resolutions in the agenda much time and attention could not be given to the examination of each one of them. However, it was also stated that the first session had a successful gathering of people of various races, religion and linguistic groups who pledged for unity and agreed to surge forward together to achieve a common goal, which appeared to be indeed

a unique sign of "India's unity". The readers were also reminded that "English education and British rule are at the root of the birth of this unity", and also that the British rule was necessary for a long time for the good of India. British officers should continue in the Civil Services, but it was not a bad idea to Indianise half of the civil services for the present³⁷.

Representatives from the various associations of Assam not only attended the successive sessions of the Congress but also expressed their views on various issues³⁸. There was a discussion on the working of the jury system in the Congress of 1886. Resolution IX of that Congress stated, 'that in the opinion of this Congress, the innovations made in 1872 in the system of trial by jury, depriving the verdicts of juries of all finality, has proved injurious to the country and that the powers then, for the first time vested in the session Judges and High Courts, of setting aside verdicts of acquittal, should be at once withdrawn'. However, the case of Assam was different. As at that time Assam was a province having a large body of European tea planters, more or less a planters *raj* was working in the province and jury system gave them a new handle to intensify their oppression, especially on the tea garden *coolies*³⁹. So Devicharan Baruah emphatically pointed out in the Congress of 1886 :

*The introduction of jury system there (in Assam) has been injurious chiefly in cases in which Europeans are involved because the majority in the jury are selected from a class of men strong in race prejudices and ignorant of the first principle of jurisprudence They are generally a class greatly wanting not only in culture but in the sense of fair play (Where natives of India are concerned) wrongly supposed to be inherent in all Britons, and their verdict is not always in conformity with the evidence or dictates of justice. This system is one reason why our poor coolies are oppressed in Assam*⁴⁰.

Thus though a loyalist, Devicharan Baruah spared no effort to criticise that it would be wrong to believe that all "Britons" were cultured or fair minded. To achieve this boldness at a time, when the word "Briton" was something beyond defilement, was really noteworthy. However, this does not mean that he was not in favour of the system as such. He would rather welcome it with judicious modification. He opined :

*If however, even in the jury system we get fair play if the European members of the jury were reduced to one half and the remaining half were taken from the native community even in Assam there would not be any great probability of injustice to the poorer classes*⁴¹.

Opinion however differ on the jury system even amongst the representatives of Assam. In the Congress session at Allahabad (1892) Lakshminath Bezbaruah, strongly advocated the re-introduction of the system on the ground that the trial by jury was as old in Assam as the British rule. "If there is any province in India", he contended, "which wants the trial by jury more than any other, it is Assam", since Assam was a Non-Regulated province with a backward and poor people, majority of them being illiterate. Moreover, "raw and inexperienced civilians are generally imported into Assam who not only administer justice in a lawless manner but tyrannise over the people", and Assam had no good barrister or advocate to safeguard against the miscarriage of justice⁴².

As a product of western education Devicharan Baruah realized the importance of the fundamental principles of democracy to be introduced in India. So when the question of representation and local autonomy came in the course of the proceedings of the second Congress he said :

Unless representative system is introduced the real wants of the

country can scarcely be met. Allowing freely (that) foreigners and strangers as they are to all that most intimately affect us, (they) are actuated by the highest motives and do their best for us, the present state of the country and the universal feeling that pervades it sufficiently show that neither the purity of their intention nor the conscientiousness of their efforts can compensate for the want of the practical sympathy with a detailed knowledge of the circumstances of our case, which only our people, carefully selected can supply⁴³.

This shows that he realized that local autonomy and popular representation were the only ways by which Indian administration could be made beneficial to the people. In this opinion he was at par with the advanced and enlightened political elites of the nation during that period⁴⁴. He showed the way to the Assamese middle class for active participation in the legislative process⁴⁵.

In the Congress session of 1887 held at Madras a resolution was adopted which stated, "that in view of the loyalty of the people, the hardship which it causes, and the unmerited slur which it casts upon the people of this country, the Congress is of opinion that the present Arms Act should be repealed". Bipin Chandra Pal, a representative from Assam, while seconding the resolution opined that the Arms Act was not in conformity with the loyalty of the Indian subjects.

In the same Congress another resolution was moved which read, "That in the opinion of the Congress, it is desirable that the government should establish military colleges in this country where the sons of noblemen and gentlemen of all classes, permanently resident in India may be educated and trained for a military career as officers of Indian army". When the question of financing such a project arose an amendment was moved suggesting that "the funds loyally offered by the native states be utilized in aid of the establishment of such colleges". Bipin Chandra Pal opposed this amendment on two grounds. First, as the native press was opposing the acceptance of money offered by the native states so it would be against the principle of the congress to suggest to the government as to where that money should be spent. On the other hand according to him this was a matter of foreign policy, so the Congress should not interfere in it⁴⁶.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the lands now occupied by the Assam tea plantations were mainly dense and uninhabitable jungles. In the clearings here and there the villagers enjoyed an economy which was almost self-sufficient and they were therefore not much interested in the employment offered by the tea planters, while the population of the more developed parts of Assam were, as a rule, neither inclined, nor compelled by circumstances, to leave home in search or work. Facing an acute labour shortage, the planter community urged the government to enhance the land revenue rates so that the poor peasants could be brought out from the villages. They further recommended that a ban should be made on the sale of opium, as it was believed that widespread consumption of opium had made the local people apathetic to work⁴⁷. As early as 1839, C.A. Bruce, the discoverer of tea in Assam had complained bitterly of the shortage and unsatisfactory character of local labour and in 1841 the Assam Company attempted to import labour from Chota Nagpur. An outbreak of cholera proved disastrous and none of the recruits reached the company's gardens. Further attempts to obtain local labour were made but without much success. The difficulties of doing so were well described by the Principal Assistant of Lakhimpur a few years later.

It is a very rare thing indeed for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. Their taking such work at all is generally attributable to temporary necessity, as for instance inability to pay their

revenue, wanting to get married and not having the necessary means, being a debt to a *Kyah* and wanting if possible to escape payment of his exorbitant interest, or, as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of a yoke of bullocks for cultivating purposes⁴⁸.

The problem was again highlighted, many years later, by the Royal Commission on Labour :

From the point of view of the employer, the outstanding problem during the whole history of tea planting in Assam has been scarcity of labour. Where the bulk of the tea gardens stand today was, seventy years ago, uncultivated and nearly uninhabited jungle, and for the expansion of the industry it has been necessary continuously to import fresh labour. The Surma valley was able to secure a certain amount of labour either locally or from adjoining districts in Bengal. But in the Assam valley the supply of local labour was negligible, and it was found impossible to obtain supplies from areas nearer than Chota Nagpur and Bihar. When it is remembered that, for many years, the only way of reaching the tea districts of this valley was by a steamer journey of several days up the Brahmaputra and an emigrant had to undertake a long railway journey in addition. The difficulties confronting the early planters will be realized This factor of distance and inaccessibility has made recruiting expensive, and it is this expense that has been responsible for many of the troubles associated with the supply of labour of Assam The efforts of the planters were therefore directed, almost from the first, towards ensuring that, if a man was recruited to work on a particular garden, he actually worked there and not elsewhere⁴⁹.

Unfortunately, both before and after the formation of the *Tea Planters' Association* in 1859 the actual recruitment was in the main left to Calcutta contractors, some of whom were completely unscrupulous.

Contractors collected *coolies* by the hundred on false promises of high pay and light work and dispatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey. The result was shocking mortality on the voyage up, while many of the immigrants were of caste or constitution (sic) which precluded all hope of their surviving many months in the jungles of Assam⁵⁰.

The only legislation in force at this time regulating relations between managers and labourers in the tea estates was the Act XIII of 1859 (The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act)⁵¹. The Act rendered the labourer liable to prosecution for any breach of contract, but gave him no protection against the employer. The unsatisfactory state of affairs led in 1861 to the appointment by the Government of Bengal of a Committee of Enquiry into the immigration of labourers to Assam and Cachar. The Committee found matters to be very bad and as a result the first Inland Emigration Act, Bengal Act III of 1863⁵² was passed to control emigration to Assam⁵³. In an article published in *Somprakash* of Calcutta in 1886, the Act of 1882⁵⁴ was condemned in these words : "Oh, residents of Bengal and Assam", it was asked, "Can't you crush the vanity of the white planters by killing this *coolies* Act"⁵⁵.

It were these press reports which provoked *Mou* to come out with venomous comments against the move to better the condition of the tea garden labourers in three out of its four issues during the years 1886-87. In course of a six page anonymous article, it drew up a list of benefits which the plantation workers were supposed to derive from their European employers⁵⁶. Though complimented by the Calcutta mouthpiece of British capital, the *Englishman*, the reactionary views of *Mou* were not shared by the Assamese middle class in general. The Assamese students of Calcutta whose "minds had already been turned red

in the furnace of the political ideology of the new congress", writes Bezbaruah in his autobiography, "reacted sharply to this pro-planter stance"⁵⁷. He got a letter published in *Mou*, indicating the role of the Bengal press and explaining the evils associated with the labour recruitment system⁵⁸.

Unfortunately, despite pressure from all ranks no resolution could be moved on the question of the Assam *coolies* in the early seasons of the Congress mainly due to technical and jurisdictional difficulties⁵⁹.

Congress Attitude Towards Tea Garden Workers:

In the 1888 Congress held at Allahabad a resolution was moved stating, "that having regard to the poverty of the people, the importance of encouraging indigenous manufactures and the difficulty of practically introducing any general system of technical education with the present imperfect information, government be moved, to delay no longer the appointment of a mixed commission to enquire into the present industrial condition of the country"⁶⁰. Bipin Chandra Pal suggested that an amendment be made by adding that a solution should be made of the problem of emigration also. Because according to him the poverty of the nation was mainly due to "agricultural depression" caused by "congestion of agricultural population". He opined that "the most effective means for removing agricultural distress" was to remodel the emigration laws. He reminded the Congress that it should not be an organization" to run after grand ideas, and high sentiments but neglect things nearer home"⁶¹. At that time there were four kinds of emigration, he said : (i) to the colonies (ii) to Burma (iii) inland emigration to Assam (iv) inland emigration which has sent out large number of *coolies* to Assam and this system reduced their lives "to a condition of quasi slavery". He appealed to the Congress to consider the matter in the interest of justice and humanity. However, the Congress was of the opinion that the problem of emigration itself was a serious problem and should be discussed independently and should not be made a part of the resolution that centred round encouragement to the indigenous manufacture and technical education. On this ground the amendment was withdrawn⁶².

In the 1889 Congress held at Bombay, Bipin Chandra Pal conveyed his thanks to Charles Bradlaugh, the leader of the British labour party, who attended the session "on the behalf of wretched and down-trodden slave population" of Assam and for his efforts to champion "the cause of Assam *coolies* in the parliament". He also thanked "the working people of England Who have in the past expended their money and their blood in removing the shackles of the slavery in every part of the world". He criticized the defects of representation in England, where more than one third of the general population were unrepresented, "and opined that a judicious system of representation should be introduced in India"⁶³.

In the 1896 Congress held at Calcutta a resolution in connection with emigration of the *coolies* to Assam was moved. It was resolved that "having regard to the facility of intercourse between all parts of India Assam, this Congress is of the opinion that the time has arrived when the Inland Emigration Act I of 1882, as amended by Act VII of 1893 should be repealed". In moving the resolution Jogendra Chandra Ghose, a delegate from Calcutta gave a clear picture of the horrible conditions prevailing in the tea plantations of Assam. According to the existing system, a labourer after being registered before a medical officer, might be sent to jail for desertion or for refusing to work. Anyone harbouring or abetting a deserter would face the same consequence. The laws were enacted to help the tea planters to get cheap supply of labour to the distant tea gardens situated in unhealthy tracts. The Act resulted in the creation of a class of recruiters called *Arkatis* whose "power of mischief" was "regretted alike by the officials, planters and the people of the country".

The *Arkatis* took the nefarious systems of "forcible kidnapping" and "fraudulent misrepresentation as means for recruiting labourers". This made the lives of the poor victims so miserable that occasionally they had to take recourse to suicide. So in Ghose's opinion, the "government had no right to turn a deaf ear to the cries of these poor people and should remove this frightful monster which is the creation of the law and nothing short of total repeal will meet the requirements of the case". He was of the opinion that this system was not beneficial to the province to which they were taken. It was profitable only to the "handful of planters". He also gave vivid descriptions of the oppression and inhuman physical tortures meted out to the labourers in the tea gardens. They had no holiday and non-Act *coolies*⁶⁴ got more remuneration than the Act *coolies*⁶⁵. The rate of mortality among the Act *coolies* was higher than that of the non-Act *coolies*. Thus it appears that the Act was in force mainly to give the planters supply of labour at a cheaper rate. The act was originally enacted in consideration to the difficulties of transportation. Without the help of an Act emigration of labour to the distant tracts in Assam was not possible. But in view of the improved transportation system this became quite unnecessary and hence it should be repealed, Ghose argued. In the opinion of the speaker this Act supported a system of "quasi slavery" and was the greatest "blot" on the English people whose greatest glory was that they were "the liberators of slaves".

In seconding this resolution Bipin Chandra Pal opined that the subject committee should be thanked for placing this matter in the platform of the Congress, because the public feelings throughout India on this subject was "very strong". He also gave illustrations of the horrible aspects of the "quasi slavery" system and said that the Act should be repealed "if for no other considerations out of regard for the freedom that is the birth right of every British subject and out of regard for the fair name of England". Rajanikanto Sarkar, another delegate from Bengal also supported the proposal which was then put to vote and carried "by acclamation"⁶⁶.

In the 1897 Congress at Amaravati, Bipin Chandra Pal while conveying the vote of thanks gave a clear picture of the gradual transformation of the Congress. He described how the Congress was at a loss by the constant rebuffs of the government to its proposals and it was verging towards sedition. But the counsel of the wise prevailed and saved the Congress "clear of the rock of sedition on the one hand and the shoals and quick sands of cowardice on the other"⁶⁷. Although the initiative in the agitation in favour of tea garden labourers was taken by the Indian Association at the Madras session in 1887 it was treated as a provincial rather than a national issue⁶⁸.

In the Delhi session of the Congress in 1901, Jogendra Chandra Ghose again moved a resolution on the problem of the tea garden labourers of Assam. The Congress while thanking the benevolent intentions of the Government of India, however regretted that immediate effect had not been given to the proposal of the government to enhance the wages of the tea garden workers of Assam, Ghose also applauded the sincere efforts of Henry Cotton, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam to raise the wages of the labourers, but he had also failed in his attempt due to the opposition of the planters, Ghose also condemned the existing laws which were enacted to supply cheap labour to the European planters in the unhealthy tea-tracts of Assam⁶⁹.

Thus it is evident that the early sessions of the Indian National Congress created a good deal of enthusiasm among the people of Assam. Quite a good number of delegates attended the early sessions of the Indian National Congress and tried to unite their cause under the banner of an all India organisation⁷⁰.

The desire for participation in the legislative process was also

growing in the minds of the Assamese middle class. While supporting Surendranath Banerjee's resolution, containing tentative suggestions for the expansion and indianisation of the Council system, Devicharan Baruah, in the Calcutta Congress of 1886 said that the introduction of "a representative system in some form" was as urgently required in Assam as in other provinces⁷¹. The founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was not merely the handiwork of a few British and Indian gentlemen. It was also the response of the Indian middle classes, which accelerated the process of new national awakening. The Assamese middle classes were also no exception as they responded similarly⁷². Many years later the States Reorganization Commission reported that : "The national movement which achieved India's independence was built up by harnessing the forces of regionalism"⁷³.

The efforts of these intelligentsia led to the growth of modern ideas like nationalism, nationality formation, search for identity and a political consciousness hitherto unknown before. The Assamese leaders well represented the province and made it quite evident that Assam was very much an integral part of the Indian sub-continent. It was the true spirit of these leaders which ensured Assam's participation in every stage of the Indian independence movement. It was their efforts that saw to it that Assam marched together along with her Indian counterparts in every sphere in the years to come. In the meanwhile the need was felt by the Assamese intelligentsia for a board based political organization to represent to the government the needs and aspirations of the people⁷⁴. It was in the context that the Assam Association was formed which was to play a significant part in the political advancement of the province prior to the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress in 1921⁷⁵.

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HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Committee Proceedings, 1886-1928. | 29. Ibid. | 30. Ibid. | 31. Ibid. | 32. Ibid. | 33. Ibid. | 34. Guha, A. (1988), Planter Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947, 64. | 35. Barpujari, H.K. (ed), op.cit., 165. | 36. HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Proceedings, 1886-1928. Resolutions to the following effect were passed amidst great enthusiasm : "That this meeting is of opinion that it has now become necessary alike in the interest of India and England to reconstruct the Legislative Councils on the basis that no less than two-third of the whole council should be elected members chosen by the local bodies", and "that the council thus formed should have the right of interpellation". Further that "the minimum age of the Civil Service Examination should be raised to 23 years", and that "open competitive examinations should be held in India simultaneously and in English". | 37. Guha, A., op.cit., 65. | 38. Barpujari, H.K. (ed) (1993), The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V, 240. | 39. The word coolie is now considered derogatory and has been replaced in official documents by 'labourer'. It has been used here where appropriate to the period described. | 40. Report of the Second Indian National Congress, 84. | 41. HPA, 1880 (sic), File No. 297, 'Assam and Indian National Congress'. | 42. HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Committee Proceedings, 1886-1928. | 43. Report of the Second Indian National Congress, 109-110. | 44. HPA, 1880 (sic), File 297, 'Assam and Indian National Congress'. | 45. Guha, A., op.cit., 67. | 46. Ibid. | 47. Antrobus, H.A. (1957), A History of Assam Company, 99. | 48. Griffiths, P. (1967), The History of the Indian Tea Industry, 267. | 49. Quoted in Ibid., 267-268. | 50. Ibid., 268. | 51. Act XIII of 1859 was passed at the instance of the members of the Calcutta Traders' Association and was at first intended to be applied only to the Presidency towns. It was however, almost at once extended to the tea districts (except Sylhet) to which it was extended a little later. | 52. Act III of 1863 provided that all recruiters should be licensed and that every intending emigrant should be medically examined as to his fitness to work in the tea districts; and that the contract of service should not exceed four years and the steamers and boats conveying coolies should also be licensed. | 53. Griffiths, P., op.cit., 269. | 54. The Act of 1882 introduced the 'Dhubri System' under which contractors could escape from the obligations of the Act by sending their coolies to Dhubri and recruiting them there. | 55. Guha, A., op.cit., 65-66. | 56. 'Cah Bagisar Coolie', Mou, December, 1886. | 57. Bezbaruah, L.N. (1992), Mor Jivan Soworon, 78. | 58. Ibid. | 59. Guha, A., op.cit., 66. | 60. HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Committee Proceedings, 1866-1928. | 61. Ibid. | 62. Ibid. | 63. Ibid. | 64. Non-Act coolies did not come under any law and hence while an Act coolie earned Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 a month, the non-Act coolie earned more than him. | 65. Act coolies were those who fell under the purview of the labour laws of Act I of 1882 and Act XIII of 1859. | 66. HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Committee Proceedings, 1886-1928. | 67. Ibid. | 68. Banerjee, D., 'Century of the Publication of Coolie Kahini Perspectives', Proceedings of the North East India History Association, Seventh Session, p. 13. | 69. HPA, 1928, File No. 324, All India Congress Committee Proceedings, 1886-1928. | 70. Hazarika, B.B., op.cit., 439. | 71. Report of the Second Indian National Congress, 109-110. | 72. Guha, A., op.cit., 67. | 73. Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, 38. | 74. Barpujari, H.K. (ed) (1993), The comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V, 241. | 75. 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