



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

HISTORY

ASSAM IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT AND THE ISSUES RELATED TO FOOD

KEY WORDS: Assam, boycott, colonial, movement, opium, salt, wine

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ABSTRACT

The entry of Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian politics, completely changed the picture. People took part in freedom struggle in huge numbers and that could be noticed for the first time, from the active participation of the common people in the Non cooperation Movement. Again the emergence of the organization of Assam Provincial Congress Committee in 1920 morally boosted the people. Like the rest of India, the Congress leaders and volunteers took several agendas in these movements. Besides the main political goal for freedom, they also took several social reform programs in Assam such as agitation against the addiction of opium, wine and liquor that crippled the lifestyle of the Assamese people. One of the main programs of these movements were picketing in front of the wine, liquor, opium stop, to popularize anti opium, liquor awareness which seriously made impact upon the government's income. Both the programs (political and social reform movement) went simultaneously under the banner of Congress. This paper tries to understand the close relation between food and the agendas of freedom fighters in Assam during the course of the struggle.

METHODOLOGY

The approach of this study is historical and exploratory in nature. To serve the purpose of the topic, both conventional and analytical methods of investigation are followed. An attempt has been made to analyse the archival data on historical context. Besides these, several data are also collected from the autobiographies of some of the prominent persons of colonial Assam. However, the facts collected from edited books, journals, internet files are also taken into consideration for this purpose.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous books has been published on Indian freedom struggle. In case of Assam, many freedom fighters wrote autobiographies which give vivid picture of various courses of freedom movement in Assam. The edited volumes of Political History of Assam provides ample information of non cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India movement. Dr. Amalendu Guha's "Planter-raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826-1947," M. Taybullah's 'Karagarar sithi' are two most valuable books on freedom politics of Assam. But there are very few books which critically deal with the food issue in relation to the freedom movements. However to certain limit, Debeswar Sharma's by 'Herai Jua Dinbur' and 'Bhratar Swadhinata Snagramat Assamar Awadan' by Laxminath Tamuly tries to study the importance of opium agitation in courses of freedom struggle. Loknath Goswami's 'Mati aru Manuhar Silpi Hemanga Biswas describes the importance and relevance of 'salt satyagraha' among the common people of the region.

DISCUSSION:

Like the other parts of India, Non cooperation Movement was started in Assam with peaceful protests and boycotts. Laxminath Tamuly opines that in Assam this movement turned into a movement for prohibition of opium, bhang, alcohol and other products. Muhammad Taybullah in his 'Karagaror Sithi' mentioned that in Assam the Non cooperation Movement could be termed as 'opium revolution'.¹

There was nothing special or new in the constructive measures taken for this movement in Assam. Even Mahatma Gandhi realized the necessity to eliminate opium from the society. That's why he gave the call, "Eliminate opium and you will get Swaraj."² A Congress volunteer from Jorhat Khetekdhar Baruah in his autobiography states that he, Ratnadhhar Baruah and their colleague started *satyagraha* against opium, alcohol in Jorhat town more specially in the Baligaon region. Due to their constant activities, those villagers who were addicted to opium gradually gave up this bad habit. Till 1922, the remaining 3 alcoholic also gave up their bad habits. But one interesting thing came out from his book is that during the movement, many congress workers smuggled *sada* (dried nicotine-rich leaves), tobacco inside the

campus of the Jorhat jail with the help of other prisoners. When Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, one of the leading political figure in the first two decades of colonial Assam heard such news, he lamented for the ideological distraction of some of the congress volunteers. But, finally these workers felt sorry for their misdeeds and promised Bordoloi not to do such crime again.³

The government cleverly set up a *Madar mahal* (local wine brewery) in the nearby areas of every tea garden or tea estates to extract the weekly earnings of the tea garden workers from their hands through alcohol. The table below exposes the impact of the 'opium satyagraha' in Assam. The following table⁴ shows the gradual decline in opium consumption as a result of such measures.

Year	sell(maund)	in rupee
1920-21	1519	44,12,000
1921-22	NA	39,16,000
1922	967	35, 86,000
1923	920	NA

SOURCE: LaxmiNath, Tamuly, Bhratar Swadhinata Snagramat Assamar Awadan, P77

The same thing happened in the case of *Bhang* (hemp) also. The sale of bhang was reduced from 632 maunds in 1921-22 to 391 maunds in 1922-23. But a Congress party source claimed that the sale of bhang and opium was much more declined than the government report. It was declined by 180 maunds 11 seers and 601 maunds respectively in between 1921 to 1923.⁵ Cigarette smoking had been almost stopped⁶ and the remaining few, used cigarette made inside India. Prior to the movement, the numbers of cigarette smokers were also increased. By the end of 1921 collection of Government excise revenue fell by 18.27%. The consumption of liquor fell by 49.8%, opium by 35.8% and hemp (ganja) by 24.4%. But According to the Congress party source, the sale of these items was reduced almost by 50%.⁷ The excise revenue was reduced from 75, 37,000 in 1921-22 to 56, 81,000 in 1922-23. The Anti Opium movement in Assam as part of the Non cooperation movement became so rampant that to safeguard the excise duties and taxes the government sent almost all the leaders and other workers of the Congress party to the jail. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi informed Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report, 1925 that 'Anti Addiction Movement' was so vibrant that the wine shops and the opium shops were almost closed due to the absence of customers.⁸ So it can be said that though initially, the Non cooperation movement in Assam started with the burning of foreign goods and clothes, and boycotting government jobs, to certain limit, it gradually turned into the stayagraha movement for the prohibition of opium, liquor, *bhang* etc.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The movement started with Mahatma Gandhi's famous Dandi March in 1930. The main feature of this march was breaking the salt laws. Actually salt could be made in India. But the colonial masters imported salt from Europe and sold it in India by imposing tax. So, Gandhi by breaking the salt law directly challenged the very existence of British administration in a democratic way. Following the footsteps of Gandhi, salt satyagraha was held all over India. But in Assam Valley, salt satyagraha was not possible due to the lack of salt mine or other oceans, beaches. So, in this region, the movement started as a satyagraha or protest against the circulation of opium, wine and other harmful beverages. So, at the initial stage, the leaders of the Congress Party on the approval of the high command decided to operate the movement through the boycott of foreign goods(including food items) , jobs and 'opium satyagraha'. People were asked not to pay revenue of different kinds to the government. In 1939, Gopinath Bordoloi ministry publicly banned opium use in Sivsagar and Dibrugarh sub division. On 15 April, 1939, Gopinath Bordoloi, the then C.M. of Assam declared the ban on opium in a public meeting held in Dibrugarh.⁹

Meanwhile in the Sylhet district, salt was produced from the saline water of the Bay of Bengal and there Salt Satyagraha was successfully done.¹⁰ Dhirendranath Dasgupta, Bidubhushan Chaudhury, Harendrachandra chaudhury, Dwarikanath chaudhury led the masses in different times to the break the salt law at Noakhuli. Again, melas(fairs) were organized not only to preach the idea of "Swadeshi" but also to sale the country liquor and gambling.¹¹ Hemaga Biswas, a leftist activist gives a beautiful picture of the importance of breaking salt law in the normal life of tribal people. He stated that once Biswas brought some packets of 'prohibited salt' (salt produced by the people by boiling water which was prohibited by the government because government had the monopoly right over salt making) to a tribal village and started to propagate the value of this salt i.e. made by breaking salt law. Then a tribal person asked him how much salt Biswas could give them and Biswas answered in 'two'. Then the person remarked, "what would we do with the two packets only? We need more salt than these two packets daily. If these few salts couldn't satisfy our daily needs, it has little value."¹² Such incidents exposed the limitations of salt satyagraha in the day to day life of the illiterate tribal people.

QUIT INDIA MOAVEMENT

The last phases of mass movement in all over India was popularly known as Quit India Movement. On 8 August, 1942, All India National Congress took the resolution for demanding the colonial authority to quite India. But, the colonial Government arrested all the top level leaders of Congress. In Assam also, the same situation occurred and all the responsibilities were fell in the hands of the volunteers. But people here also actively participated in the courses of the movement. At Bajali, 'Karma Parisad'(working Council) was formed who (functioned for 8 months) seized 300 goats from a party for refusing to pay dues. It was a kind of free government which had president, prime minister and other officials in the exact style of the colonial government. Without its permit nobody could sell or buy paddy within Bajali area. Both the sellers and buyers were required to pay at the rate of 14 annas per cart load of the paddy or 4 annas per 10 maunds of paddy to the *panchayat* found.¹³ The tea stall owners were asked not to supply tea to the military and other government officials without Panchayat's permission. Several leaflets were circulated asking people neither to pay revenue nor to sell paddy, pulses and other food products to the Government employees.¹⁴ A vigorous no tax campaign was started in most of the rural areas of the province. Peasants were asked not to pay revenue to the Government officials also asked them not to sell any paddy, pulses and other foodstuff to the government employees or army men. In many areas revenue was not collected till 28th February 1943. The people of Garmur Satra had to eat their daily meal without salt, sugar, atta, etc. for their support to the movement.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

With the establishment of Indian National Congress (I.N.C.) the

political picture of India began to change. Under the banner of the Congress, the nationalist awareness took the form of national movement and Assam was not lagging behind in this case with the rest of India. So from the Swadeshi movement to the Quit India Movement the people of Assam offered their cooperation and contribution for the cause of the nationalist movements. This chapter tries to understand the changing food issues in the context of changing political scenario. The main issues and programs of the whole Non cooperation and Civil disobedience movement centered round opium, liquor and wine. Even Gandhi had to say, "Eradicate opium and you will get Swaraj". The success of these two major movements in Assam was mainly laid in the achievement of making people aware of the drawbacks of opium, liquor and to reduce the government's income from these items.

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