



## Quit India Movement In Assam: A Historical Study

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### ABSTRACT

The Quit India Movement was the last phase of freedom movement of India's Independence struggle started with the resolution adopted on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1942 by the Congress working committee's meeting at Bombay. Gandhiji's call to the nation was 'Do or Die' and inspired by this motto of Gandhiji the movement received wholesale responses from the countrymen. Gandhiji and several prominent congress leaders were arrested on the very following day of the passing of the 'Quit India' Resolution and the British Government declared Congress an illegal organization.

Likewise the other parts of the country, in Assam too the movement started with a massive response from the Assamese people. Prominent Congress leaders including Gopinath Bordoloi, Sinddhi Nath Sarma were arrested. Assamese women also took active participation in this movement. Assamese women organized Mrityu- Bahini or Santi-Sena which was the backbone of the movement. There were hartals, strikes and demonstrations in all districts of Assam. The British Government resorted a repressive method to subdue the movement. Kushal Konwar, Kanaklata and many other sacrificed their lives in this movement.

**KEYWORDS:** Quit India Movement, Congress, Door Die, Hartals, Assamese Women, Mrityu Bahini

### INTRODUCTION:

The last phase of India's struggle for Independence, 'Quit India' 'Bharat Choro' movement started with the famous resolution adopted in the historic All India Congress Committee Session at Bombay on 8 August, 1942. The slogan 'Quit India' which launched the historic movement also became famous by the name of 'August Revolution.' Gandhiji addressed the delegates. In his speech he said: *"The actual struggle does not commence this very moment. You have merely placed certain powers in my hands. My first act will be to wait upon His Excellency the Viceroy and plead with him for the acceptance of the Congress demand. This may take two or three weeks. What are you going to do in the meantime? There is the spinning wheel...but there is something more you have to do.... Everyone of you should, from this moment, consider himself a free man or woman and even act as if you are free and no longer under the heel of this imperialism."*<sup>1</sup>

Gandhiji made another famous call to the nation 'Do or Die'. This famous resolution had created massive excitement throughout the country. Demonstrations, strikes, hartals, picketing, hunger strike, general defiance of law and establishment of parallel government were the main programmes of the movement chalked out by Gandhiji and the common people had demonstrated an unparalleled heroism and militancy in this struggle. Massive response to Gandhiji's call shocked the colonial government and the government arrested Gandhiji and the members of the CWC and a large number of Congress workers on the very following day of the passing of the resolution 'Quit India' and declared the Congress an illegal organization. The British government adopted repressive measures to suppress the movement. The repressive measures taken by the government made the Indians great resentment. But their repressive measures could not stop the Indians from participating in the movement. Throughout the country there were strikes demonstrations hartals, picketing, against the colonial government which were attempted to be suppressed by firing and lathicharge. Indian people's reaction was spontaneous and in some areas violent. Government Buildings, Railway, Police Stations, Courts were attacked by the people. The unique character of this movement was, every class of society actively

<sup>1</sup> Chandra. Bipan, Tripathi. A & De, Barun, *Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, pp.211

participated in this struggle. Moreover, the repression that they faced was the most brutal that had ever been used against the national movement.<sup>2</sup>

In Assam the movement was started by the leading Congress leaders. The people of Assam played remarkable role at every phase of the freedom struggle since 1920 to 1947. People from every district actively participated in this movement. All prominent leaders including Gopinath Bordoloi, Siddhinath Sarma, Md. Tayebullah were arrested. Subsequently, even Pitambar Dev Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of the Garamur *Satra* and his deputy, Krishna Dev Goswami were detained for their over support and participation in the movement.<sup>3</sup> Like their counterparts in other parts of India, the people of Assam also defied the creed of non-violence by taking sabotage activities.<sup>4</sup> An official reports records: "From the end of August onwards, sporadic arson and interference with railway lines and telegraphs occurred in the Assam valley districts, particularly in Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar... in that chronological order."<sup>5</sup>

### OBJECTIVES:

The objective of this paper is to analyze the factors and background of the famous Quit India movement of 1942 and Assam's role in this Movement.

### METHODOLOGY:

The paper is based on secondary data primarily collected from different books, journals, and government documents.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The Quit India Movement was the last phase of freedom struggle against the colonial government under Gandhi's leadership. Why Gandhi and the Congress had started such revolutionary movement in 1942? For the answer to this question we might have looked into the political scenario of the late 1930s. Since 1930, after the civil disobedience movement, the Congress leadership did not launch any major movement against the colonial government. Therefore, the popularity and relevancy of the Congress was challenged by the emergence of several new political developments. It seemed that the Congress party losing control over many trends within the national movement which were moving in different directions. After the Civil Disobedience movement the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was formed in May 1934 under leadership of the socialist and other leftist elements like Jayaprakash Narayan, Achhut Patwardhan, Asoke Mehta, Yusuf Mehrali, Narendra Dev and others. However, the CSP, gained strongholds in some provinces. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati had formed the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in 1929 to mobilize peasant grievances against the zamindari attacks and came under the influence of the socialists. At the same time, the Kisan Sabha movement gained its stronghold in south India particularly in the central districts of Andhra Pradesh under the leadership of the CSP activist N. G. Ranga. As a result, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was formed at the Lucknow session of the Congress in April 1936 where Swami Sahajanand Saraswati was elected as its first president. AIKS made their demands, such as the abolition of zamindari system, granting of occupancy rights to all tenants etc. They also announced that an agrarian revolution would be its ultimate goal.

The formation of CSP and AIKS were indicating of the new trends in mass politics. Many Congress activists and supporters left the party. The younger and more militant nationalists rather found their destination in the Communist Party, the Kisan Sabha and other radical organizations. Apart from these developments, the formation of the the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB) in 1939 by *Netaji* Subash Chandra Bose was also a challenge for the Congress leadership. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose aimed at consolidating leftwing sections of the Congress and tried to develop an alternative leadership. The failure of Cripps Mission in 1942 made it clear that the British government was not willing to make an honourable settlement of any kind of constitutional remedy to India's problems. Apart from British obduracy, there were other factors that made a struggle both inevitable and necessary. Popular discontent, a product of rising price and war-time shortages, was gradually mounting. High-handed government actions such as the cammandering of boats in Bengal and Orissa to prevent their being used by Japanese had led to considerable anger among the people.<sup>6</sup> For all these reasons, launching of an another mass movement was inevitable.

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE MOVEMENT:

As Assam was concerned, both Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley played a very significant role in this movement. The movement became a mass movement in the entire state. The Congress leaders formed a

<sup>2</sup> Chandra. Bipan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Panguin Books, 1988, pp 457

<sup>3</sup> Home Pol. File no 18/4/43, F.R., Assam, 2<sup>nd</sup> half April, 1943.

<sup>4</sup> Baruah. S.L, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, M.M publishers, New Delhi, 2020, pp 601

<sup>5</sup> District Calender, no.9 cited PHA, vol.III, p.66

<sup>6</sup> Chandra. Bipan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Panguin Books, 1988, pp 458

revolutionary society. The prominent leaders of this movement were G N Bordoloi, Md Tayebullah, Sinddhinath Sarma in Brahmaputra valley and Kedar Nath Bhattacharjee, Binode Behari Chakraborty, Nirode Kumar Gupta, and Birendra Kumar Das in Barak valley. At Barpeta the houses of Mauzadars were destroyed by the agitating crowd. At Sarbhog, under construction aerodrome was raided and military camps and office of the MES destroyed. In Nowgong several agitating people lost their lives due to armed atrocities of the Government. Madan Chandra Barman and Reutaram Bodo lost their lives before armed atrocities at Palasbari and people observed a protest day against such police atrocities.

At Barhampur, police action caused the death of Lakshmikanta Hazarika, Thagiram Sut, Balaram Sut and Bhugeswari Phukanani while people were celebrating the occasion of recapturing the *Santi-Sena* camp on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1942 by holding public meeting and a community feast. At Dhekiajuli, on 20 September, eight persons were killed in police firing where about thousands of people led by Kamalakanta Das proceeded to hoist the congress flag in the police station. At Gohpur, Kanaklata Barua, an eighteen year old girl was shot dead by the police while she was leading 5000 people from Chaiduar to hoist the Congress flag in the local police station. Mukunda Kakati and Hemkanta Barua seriously injured in this police firing and died later. Tilak Deka, who used to guard the village at Barpuzia at night, was shot dead by the military as he was blowing his horn to inform the villagers of their approach.

In other parts of the state cases of sabotage on the railways occurred. Such incident took place at Shahajibazar in Habibganj, at Rangiya in Kamrup, at Kampur and at Puranigudam in Nowgong, Safrai in Sibsagar, at Kachamari and at Sarupathar in Golaghat. Kushal Konwar, secretary of local Congress Committee was hanged to death on 15 June 1943 for his alleged involvement in the Sarupathar train derailment case. Demonstrations hartals, procession, picketing continued in towns of Dholpur, Bihpuria, North Lakhimpur, Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Bihali, Barpeta, Kamrup, Rangiya, Sibsagar Teok, Dergaon, Golaghat, and Nowgong, etc.

In Barak valley, the movement became a mass movement. A war-council was formed by the Congress workers to take widespread *satyagraha*. Police station at different places became target of mob-attack in Barak valley. The active leaders of this movement in Barak valley were Kedar Nath Bhattacharjee, Nirode Kumar Gupta, Binode Behari Chakraborty, and Birendra Kumar Das. Students leaders were Harinarayan Das, Jatindra Ranjan Deb, Premendra Goswami, Deva Prasad Sen, Anil Shome, Snehalata Devi and Charubala Deb. Under these Congress leaders, the movement spread in the maximum villages in the Barak Valley. In Silchar, Communist leader Achinta Bhattacharjee was arrested in the very beginning. Nikunjya Behari Goswami observed that in Cachar no mass revolution was organised. Still some among others like Srimati Jyotsna Chanda came out in the street and joined the movement whole-heartedly in Barak Valley.

From Barak Valley near about 25 leaders and workers were kept in police custody viz. Sarala Bala Devi, Purnandu Kishore Gupta, Jatindra Nath Bhadri, Kedar Nath Bhattacharjee, Naresh Nandini Dutta, Binode Behari Chakraborty, Labanya Kumar Choudhury, Gopal Chandra Das, Nikunja Behari Bhattacharjee, Durga Pada Das, Jitendra Sharma, Uma Chakraborty, and Lili Das. They organised and played a memorable role in this movement. The movement spread almost all over Assam. A group of leaders stopped the official function of the Zilla Committee. The students of Brahmaputra and Barak Valley took up a leading role for the cause of Independence. They were guided by Sachindra Mohan Datta (Laku da) who was also a torch bearer of the „Chatra Samaj“ for the growth of revolutionary spirit against the Government.<sup>7</sup>

The British government left no stone unturned to crush this mass movement. The top Congress leaders were arrested and sent to jail. Even many villagers were arrested and imprisoned on mere suspicion. Despite of the arrest and imprisonment of the top leaders, the movement continued with full swing. As the prominent leaders were in jail, some other leaders like Jyotiprasad Agrawal and Gahanchandra Goswami of Tezpur, Sankar Barua of Golaghat, Mahendra Hazarika and Lakshmi Goswami of Nowgong went underground to shoulder the movement. These leaders were influenced by the revolutionary activities in other parts of India and took to militancy and justified their actions. There were more than 30 underground volunteer cells only in Bajali by 1943. Local underground cells were also formed in different places in the state. Among these cells, *Hanuman Party* at Jallah, *Mrityu Bahini* at Nowgong, *Karma Parishad* at Bajali, *Ahimsa Biplovi Sangha* at Barpeta etc. Students and youths had played a very big and active role in this movement in both Brahmaputra and Barak valley. A number of young men belonging to the Assam Valley and studying in Calcutta and other places outside the province soon joined the leaders and took up organizational work. These students organized the movement through processions, strikes, picketing, hartals and sabotage activities and as such they motivated the masses of villages to actively participate in the movement.

Women also participated actively in this movement. As the large numbers of men in prison, the women took up the task of coordinating the programmes. Large numbers of women came out and campaigned the programmes of the movement. They formed women's wing and also enrolled themselves as members of the *Santi Sena*. *Mrityu Bahini* (Suicide Squad) was formed and Violence and sabotage activities were carried out by the women force. Chandraprova Saikiani, Puspallata Das, Amalprova Das were the prominent leaders of the

<sup>7</sup> Roy. Debashish, *Quit India Movement in Cachar: A Historical Study* IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 24, Issue 3, Ser. 8 (March. 2019) 25-28 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845

women wing. Kanaklata,, Buddheswari Hazarika, Ratnabala Phukan, Damayanti Bora, and Khahuli Nath were active members of the *Mrityu Bahini*.

The revolt of 1942 was spearheaded by the students, workers, and the peasants. There were strikes, in factories, colleges and schools. Police Stations, Post Offices and Railway Stations which were considered the symbol of British authority were attacked, set on fire or wrecked. Later some acts of sabotage were also indulged in. Telephone wires were cut, derailed trains. There was continuous exhortation to peasants to withhold tax payments.<sup>8</sup> Parallel governments were set up at Sotea, Bajali, and Kenduguri. The Government reacted sharply and let loose a reign of terror. Lathi-charge, firing and mass arrests became common feature. There were several cases of unarmed crowds being machine-gunned from the air. Police atrocities became daily occurrences. Punitive fines and summary sentence became the order of the day. The Movement was though short-lived but intense. The Government succeeded in putting down but not before over thousand people had died in police firings. Such wide-scale and intense repression had not been seen in the country since the revolt of 1857.

### CONCLUSION

The Quit India Movement was the most significant freedom movement in India after the revolt of 1857. The mass mobilization into this movement was widespread in the entire state of Assam. The middle class people led the movement and people from many urban and rural places of entire state, especially the students, peasants, workers and women were mobilized into this movement and they had faced all the brutal suppressions enforced by the colonial government and many sacrificed their lives for the independence of the country. The revolt of 1942 failed, but it achieved two things. This movement had given utterance to India's anger against imperialism and its determination for independence movement and people from many urban and rural places of entire state, especially the students, peasants, workers and women were mobilized into this movement and they had faced all the brutal suppressions enforced by the colonial government and many sacrificed their lives for the independence of the country. The revolt of 1942 failed, but it achieved two things. This movement had given utterance to India's anger against imperialism and its determination for independence.

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<sup>8</sup> Chandra. Bipan, Tripathi. A & De, Barun, *Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, pp.212