UNIT 14: ASSAM AND FREEDOM STRUGGLE-I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- explain the partition of Bengal and its impact on Assam,
- discuss the role of Assam in the Non-Co-operation Movement.

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have already discussed the factors led to the rise of nationalism in Assam. With the rise of Assamese nationalism, the people of Assam became nationally conscious and actively participated in the Indian National Movement. They participated in all the three mass movements that took place under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, namely, the Non-Co-operation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. Now in this unit we shall discuss the partition of Bengal and Non-Cooperation movement.

14.3 PARTITION OF BENGAL AND ITS IMPACT UPON ASSAM

The province of Bengal consisted of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and the Chota Nagpur region. It was the epicentre of rising Indian nationalism. The British Government in the pretext of administrative inconvenience decided

to partition the province of Bengal. Being a large province, the British Government was unable to rule Bengal. There was immense pressure on the Calcutta Secretariat and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal was unable to give his personal attention to such a big province.

In fact, it is necessary to mention here that the process of readjustment of territories had begun since the sixties of the 19th century. In 1896, it was William Ward, Chief Commissioner of Assam, who had suggested the transfer of Chittagong division and the two districts of Dacca and Mymensing to Assam. But the proposal was not pursued by the new Chief Commissioner, Henry Cotton because he felt that such a change would bring forth a lot of protests. The transfer issue was thereafter postponed for the time being.

But again early in 1903, Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal renewed the earlier proposal of the transfer of the Chittagong division, together with the districts of Dacca and Mymensing and secured the approval of Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. Lord Curzon had another motive in his mind behind the partition of Bengal. He observed that the people and the administration in the Chittagong division or in Dacca and Mymensing did not differ from those in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam. The inhabitants appeared identical in race and language, the system of land revenue also being akin. The Viceroy therefore strongly recommended the creation of a new province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' by adding the districts of Dacca and Mymensing as well as the Chittagong division to Assam.

In the name of administrative efficiency, Bengal was to be partitioned. The partition of Bengal was a deliberate attempt on the part of Lord Curzon to divide the people of Bengal on the lines of religion and to check the rising tide of nationalism in Bengal from where it had spread to other parts of the country. By a policy of 'divide and rule', the British Government separated the Muslims and the Hindus. In the newly created province of "Eastern Bengal and Assam", the Muslims were in a majority.

The entire country was rocked by the proposed scheme of partition of Bengal and the creation of the new province of 'Eastern Bengal and

Assam'. Lord Curzon's proposal for the formation of the new province named 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' created a furor all over India. The announcement of the scheme was greeted by a storm of protests and demonstration throughout the province of Bengal. Resolutions, telegrams and memorials were sent to the Government of India by individuals and organizations condemning the scheme. The Indian National Congress in its session of 1903 and 1904 strongly protested the partition plan.

During that period, nationalism in Assam was at its infant stage. In comparison to the Brahmaputra Valley, the Surma Valley was more conscious about the partition plan as they had close touch with Bengal. Initially, the reaction of the people of Assam to the Partition of Bengal was muted. They were more concerned with regional issues than mainstream politics. Hence, they failed to realise the implications of the act of partition. At the individual level, the Assamese intelligentsia tried to point out elaborately the issues at stake. They made it clear that if Assam was tagged on with the more advanced districts of Bengal, the Assamese people would have to face unequal competition from the Bengalese of East Bengal in every walk of life. If the seat of administration was shifted to Dhaka, then Assam proper would not receive the same attention as it did. But the protest of the intelligentsia was limited to the writing of letters and articles in the Press.

The Chief Commissioner called upon the Assam Association to give its views on the proposed extension of territorial jurisdiction of Assam by the incorporation of Chittagong division, Decca and Mymensing districts of Eastern Bengal. The Assam Association in a general meeting held on 14 February, 1904, opposed the scheme. It supported the opinion of Henry Cotton that Assam would be unable to have a self contained Civil Service after the proposed changes. The *Advocate of Assam* and the *Assam Banti*, the two leading newspapers of Assam of the period also vehemently opposed the union of the Eastern Bengal districts with Assam. The *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* refuted the contention that the Assam-Bengal railway could contribute substantially towards the development of the province and that for Chittagong to be developed as a port, a separate administrative unit was required.



LET US KNOW

The European planters welcomed the partition scheme as the name of Assam was retained in the nomenclature of the newly created province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. Their only fear was that in case the name Assam was removed from the nomenclature of the new province, the sale of their tea marketed as 'Assam Tea' might be affected.

In Bengal, the partition was opposed by the people on many accounts, the most important one being the communal aspect involved in the partition plan. But the people of Assam gradually got alarmed at the partition because of the possibility of domination by the non-Assamese elements. The people of Assam feared that in the proposed province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam', the Assamese would lose their separate identity and the people would be deprived of their legitimate share in the government. The Partition of Bengal made the people of Assam convinced about the destructive motives of British rule. In the Surma Valley, public resentment was more strongly expressed.

The Swadeshi Movement that had begun in the wake of the anti-partition agitation raised the national movement to new heights. The *Surma Valley Association* organized Swadeshi and boycott meetings at several places. A *Swadeshi Mission* was also started at Silchar to spread the message of Swadeshi amongst the rural masses. But more than Swadeshi, it was the idea of boycott that attracted the people of Assam more, because it promised hope for the regeneration of local industries. This was however confined to urban centres. At Dhubri, Goalpara, Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and other towns, bonfires were made of foreign goods and enthusiasm was shown in buying Swadeshi goods. One of the most important aspects of the movement in these places was the perfect understanding between the Hindus and the Muslims.

The student community of Assam played a very important role in popularising the Swadeshi Movement. In Barpeta, Tezpur and other places the students, besides organizing protest meeting, also dissuaded people

from purchasing foreign cloth. Spinning and weaving were common in every household in Assam and as such the use of Swadeshi was in vogue among the people since long time past. So far as the boycott of foreign goods was concerned many people refused to purchase foreign products.

Revolutionary ideas and secret societies gradually found their way into Assam. The *Arunachal Ashram* near Silchar played a significant role in infusing the revolutionary ideas. Through its mouth piece, *Praja-Shakti* radical ideas and the idea of ***Swadeshi*** and ***Swaraj*** were spread among the youth. In the Brahmaputra Valley, inflammatory literature was found in some hostels of the Cotton College. The voluntary organisation of the *Seva-Sangha* under leadership of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury developed during this period, on the lines of the *Anushilan Samiti* of Bengal. But the idea of revolutionary nationalism, Swadeshi and Swaraj failed to receive widespread support in Assam due to lack of political consciousness at the grass root level.



Swadeshi- A political movement in British India that encouraged domestic production and boycott of foreign goods as a step towards home rule.

Swaraj- Swaraj generally mea -ns self-governance or home rule.

It must be pointed out that the idea of national education, which was a part and parcel of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, did not receive much attention in Assam at that point of time. However, the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 came as a great relief to the people of Assam. Assam now became a Chief Commissioner's Province with its own Legislative Council from 1 April, 1912.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Which community of Assam played a very important role in popularizing the Swadeshi Movement?

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Q 5: When did Bengal partition?

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Q 6: When did the Assam Association oppose the scheme of partition of Bengal?

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14.4 THE NON CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The Swadeshi movement which mainly arose out of the anti-partition agitation had quickened the sense of national oneness and solidarity of India. The idea was slowly gaining ground even in the Congress. In 1906, Dadabhai Naoroji had declared Swaraj to be the objective of the Congress. But it was only when Mahatma Gandhi activity entered the arena of Indian politics to fight for India's independence with new methods and techniques that the Indian National Congress opened a new page in the history of India's struggle for freedom. The Punjab atrocities and the Khilafat agitation were the most important events which evoked a great discontent all over India. In 1919, the infamous Rowlatt Acts were passed by the British Government arming it with extraordinary repressive powers.

Mahatma Gandhi organized a passive resistance movement against such repressive measures. Hartals and mass demonstrations were organized in many parts of India. The government repressed the movement with a heavy hand. The worst feature of the repression was the terrible massacre by General Dyer of the unarmed people that assembled at Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar. It is known as the Massacre of Jallianwalla Bagh (1919). Martial law was proclaimed in Punjab. This Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy and Gandhiji's emergence as the undisputed leader not only helped in the growth of an all India political awareness among all sections of the people but also paved the way for the historic ***Non Co-operation*** Movement of 1921.

The dismemberment of the Turkish Empire in the First World War by the victorious Allied Powers which included Britain offended the religious sentiment of the Indian Muslims and generated anti-British feelings amongst them. This found expression in the Khilafat Movement. In Assam the Khilafat question also stirred the religious sentiments of the Muslims of both the Brahmaputra and the Surma Valleys. Gandhiji channelised the powerful currents of agitation engendered by the Punjab atrocities and the Khilafat Movement in the form of the non-violent Non Co-operation Movement of 1921. He combined the demands of the Khilafatists with those of the Non

Co-operators as he believed that a Hindu-Muslim unity in the national movement could be achieved through this.

The movement spread throughout the country and there was not a true Indian heart even in the remotest corner of this great country which was not filled with the spirit of cheerful suffering and sacrifice to attain Swaraj and see the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs redressed. The Gandhi Cap became the badge of distinction for the freedom fighter and the tricolour flag of the Congress with the emblem of the Charkha on it became henceforth the symbol of national honour. Bankim Chandra's Vande-Mataram song was sung as a national anthem.

In Assam, her leaders also came forward in support of the Non Co-operation Movement. The Assam Provincial Congress was formed at the height of the Non Co-operation Movement with the setting up of Congress Committees at the district level so that the programmes of the movement could be implemented successfully. One remarkable feature of the Non Co-operation Movement was its intense mass appeal. People of all classes, students, labourers, peasants, both men and women felt the urge for Swaraj and responded in a greater or lesser degree to the call for Non Co-operation.

Assam soon found herself in the forefront of the struggle. *The Assam Association* had promptly responded to the call of the Indian National Congress to resort to Non Co-operation for achieving India's freedom. The involvement of different classes of people of Assam in the movement was a unique feature. An important aspect of the Non Co-operation movement in Assam was the involvement of the tea garden labourers in it. The labourers were subjected to inhuman torture by the European tea planters. Not only were their wages very low but they had to work under severe restrictions. The Non Co-operation Movement offered them the opportunity for the first time to raise their voice of protest against the British exploitation. The visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam in 1921, gave a fillip to the movement and the problems of tea garden workers attracted his attention. He advised the tea planters to popularise Swadeshi among the workers. Gandhiji's visit to Assam was a tremendous success. The meetings he addressed at Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet drew

thousands of people even from the interior villages. A notable feature of the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam had been the propaganda against the consumption of opium. The Congress Volunteers in different districts made a door-to-door campaign about the evil effects of the consumption of opium.

In January, 1921, the students of Assam, following the decision of the All India Students Conference held at Nagpur in December, 1920, to participate in the Non Co-operation Movement, launched a strong agitation for boycott of schools and colleges. As a result, the students struck schools and collages with large batches of them enrolling themselves as volunteers to spread the message of Non Co-operation in the villages. The contribution of students to the success of the Non Co operation Movement was remarkable. As a matter of fact, it was the students who began the movement in Assam. Boycott of foreign goods and especially of foreign clothes, propagation of Khadi, picketing before the liquor and opium shops were the chief items in the programme for the achievement of Swaraj. Preparations for a no-tax and no-revenue campaign were also made at selected places like Boko in South Kamrup comprising an area of some six Mouzas. Many eminent lawyers suspended practice and protested against the law courts run under the English system. People's Panchayats were formed at different places in the rural areas to settle disputes outside the law courts. Non Co-operation began to be preached from the press and the platform. Government officers found it extremely hard to function in the absence of the co-operation of the people.

Women also equally participated with men in the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam. They came out of their seclusion to join in the movement of 1921. Amongst women the wife of Tarun Ram Phukan and his widowed Sister Girija Debi, and the wife of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and his widowed sister Dharmada Sundari Devi immensely contributed to the success of the movement after the arrest of the top rank leaders. Women held meetings in various places to keep up the tempo of the movement. Women were usually not arrested during the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam but there is no doubt that a new awakening came amongst them.

Prominent leaders of the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam were Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Chandranath Sarma, Tarun Ram Phukan, Kuladhar Chaliha, Pandit Kanak Chandra Sarma, Faiznur Ali, Lakheswar Barua, Basanta Kumar Das, Sibendra Nath Biswas and Brajendra Narayan Choudhury amongst the elder politicians, and Gopinath Bardoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Gopendralal Das, Md. Tayebulla, Omeo Kumar Das, Hem Chandra Barua, Debeswar Sarma, Mahadev Sarma, etc. amongst those who were comparatively young. There were many leaders also who made lifelong sacrifices for the cause of freedom.

The Non Co-operation Movement failed to achieve its immediate goal of establishing Swaraj in India. The British Government tried hard to suppress the movement and the jails were filled with political prisoners. But its apparent failure must not blind us to the fact that the movement had a tremendous impact on the people. It marked the beginning of Assam's active participation in all India politics. Assam joined the main stream of nationalist upsurge. The repressive measures of the British Government against the Non Co-operators instead of demoralising the people made them determined soldiers of the freedom movement. Gandhiji suspended the Non Co-operation movement in 1922 because of a violent incident that took place at Chauri Chaura in Bihar where 22 policemen were killed.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Answer the following questions:

a) In which year Dadabhai Naoroji had declared Swaraj to be the objectives of the Congress?

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b) When was the infamous Rowlatt Act passed?

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c) When did Mahatma Gandhi visit Assam to give a fillip to the Non Co-operation Movement?

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d) Which song of Bankim Chandra was sung as the national anthem?

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14.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt,

- about the Partition of Bengal and its impact upon Assam.
- the impact of the freedom movement in Assam and the participation of Assam in the Non Co-operation Movement.



14.6 FURTHER READINGS

1) Baruah, S.L. (1985): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Delhi,

2) Bhuyan, A.C., (1999): *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.

3) Dutta, K.N (1958): *Landmarks in the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Lawyers' Book Stall, Guwahati.



14.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a) 1858 b) 1903

Ans to Q No 2: 1860

Ans to Q No 3: 1884

Ans to Q No 4: Student.

Ans to Q No 5: 1905

Ans to Q No 6: 14 February, 1904

Ans to Q No 7: a) 1906 b) 1919
c) 1921 d) Vande Mataram

Ans to Q No 8: a) 1931
b) 1931

Ans to Q No 9: P. Lawrence.

Ans to Q No 10: 1942.

Ans to Q No 11: Mrityu Bahini, Shanti Bahini.

Ans to Q No 12: Lord Mountbatten.