UNIT 15: ASSAM AND FREEDOM STRUGGLE-II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- describe the role of Assam in the Civil Disobedience Movement,
- discuss the Quit India Movement and its impact on Assam.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you have learnt about the non-cooperation movement and its impact on Assam. Now in this unit we shall discuss the last part of the freedom struggle in Assam.

15.3 ASSAM AND THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The pace of the Indian National movement became slow after the suspension of the Non Co-operation Movement and was revived only with the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Various developments in the meantime, however, served as the background for the upsurge of the Civil Disobedience Movement. First, the appointment of the Simon Commission in 1927 offered an opportunity to unite the different groups and parties in the country against the British. Second, the freedom movement

reached new heights centering upon the opposition to the Simon Commission. Protest demonstrations, *hartals* (strike), etc, were held all over the country when the members of the Commission landed in Bombay. Third, the Congress rejected the proposal of a Round Table Conference in London for the solution of the constitutional problem as suggested by the Simon Commission except on promise of full Dominion Status, and declared in the Lahore Session in December, 1929 that Complete Independence or *Purna Swaraj* would be the goal of the Congress's fight for freedom. Thus, the Congress was preparing itself for a new phase of the movement. Fourth, another significant development was the observance of the first 'Independence Day' on 26 January, 1930. This was done to demonstrate the solidarity of the Indian people. The Congress argued that the British had ruined India economically, politically, culturally and spiritually. Congress members were directed to resign their seats in the Legislatures and preparations were made for launching a Civil Disobedience Movement including non-payment of taxes whenever possible. It was in view of these developments that Gandhiji was preparing himself and the people of the country for the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930).

In an article published in the *Young India*, Gandhiji clearly pointed out that only persons having faith in non-violence would participate in the movement for the country's freedom. He also appealed to the people not to take recourse to violence or anger. People were also advised not to abide by the laws enforced by the British Government. This new non-violent movement based on the above programme came to be known as the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In Assam, there was bickering among the Congress leaders over the Civil Disobedience movement. As the difference of opinion could not be resolved, a section of them resigned their posts. Veteran leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, etc. came out of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee. Leadership was now held by the younger leaders such as Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bardoloi, Siddhinath Sarma, Tayebulla and Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury. In the Civil Disobedience Movement, the student community played a very important role. Liladhar Barua was one

such leader who, by encouraging the students, gave a new dimension to the Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam.

Mahatma Gandhi began his Salt Satyagraha in April, 1930, after the historic boycott of the British goods. Violation of Salt Regulations by making Salt in the indigenous way and the violation of Forest laws at certain places in Assam were recorded to. Bishnuram Medhi conducted the movement with firmness and he was assisted by Hem Chandra Barua and other leaders like Omeo Kumar Das, Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua, Siddhinath Sarma, Debeswar Sarma, Lakshmidhar Sarma, Satradhikar Goswami of Garmur and many others.

Women also participated in the movement. Chandraprava Saikiani and Durgaprova Bora came forward to resort to picketing before the Cotton College at Guwahati. There were other workers and supporters in the active field. Younger leaders and Congress workers like Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury, Bijoy Chandra Bhagavati, Debendranath Sarma, Purna Sarma, Lakshmidhar Bora and others also came to the forefront. Arrest and imprisonment, beating and lathi-charge on men and women, and attachment and confiscation of property of the villagers for failure to pay the land revenue by the government became the order of the day.

The Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam was, however, more or less a student movement. The arrest of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru touched the student community of Assam so much that they pledged to oppose the British rule in all possible manners. It was the school children of Assam who first protested against the British action by a boycott of their classes. The participation of students greatly hampered the British exploitative policy and the British Government, therefore, had to take immediate steps to prevent students from joining the political movement. J. Cunningham issued a circular (26 April, 1930) to all the Headmasters of government and non-government schools. The circular, known as the Cunningham Circular, forbade students to associate themselves with any political movement. It was clearly stated in the Circular that the parents or guardians would have to give an undertaking in writing that their son or ward would refrain from political activities. The undertaking was to be signed

before the students were readmitted to the schools. But the circular failed to prevent the students from participating in politics. Rather, it provoked a sharp reaction throughout the country.

A significant role was played by the *Assam Chatra Sanmilan* in building up a formidable movement against the Cunningham Circular. In fact, after the Circular was issued, the Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam virtually became a student's movement. It has been rightly said that the Cunningham Circular formed the backbone of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam. Students all over Assam protested against the Circular in the form of boycott of educational institutions, picketing in front of school and college gates and *bringing out processions* shouting anti-circular slogans, etc. The governmental repression on the students encouraged the establishment of new schools. The Kamrup Academy of Guwahati, Sibsagar Vidyapeeth, Public High School of Dibrugarh and other schools were established at that time. These were all private schools, and had no connection with the government.

The Civil Disobedience Movement was temporarily suspended when Gandhiji went to London to attend the Second Round Table Conference (1931). But the failure of the talks led to the resumption of the movement. A large number of Congress members participated in the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1932) and with the return of the veteran leaders like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi to Congress, response of the people to the movement became greater. Another important aspect of the Civil Disobedience was that the governmental repression did not even spare the women who participated in the movement.

The impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement was also felt among the hill tribes of Assam. Gandhiji's call for Civil Disobedience inspired the Nagas to shake off British rule. The Kubai Nagas were the first to raise the banner of rebellion against the British in the wake of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

But, unfortunately, the British Government was also able to suppress the Civil Disobedience Movement. Finally, the Civil Disobedience Movement was formally withdrawn in 1934. The very next year the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, 1935.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Answer the following questions:

a) In which year the Civil Disobedience Movement was formally withdrawn?

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b) When was the Second Round Table Conference held?

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15.4 THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The year 1942 was a momentous year for the people of Assam as it was for other parts of the country. After the resignation of the Gopinath Bordoloi ministry, a new ministry headed by Mohammed Saadulla was formed in Assam. Meanwhile the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945) had its impact on the freedom movement of the country. Though Congress was opposed to the policies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, it was reluctant to support Britain's war-efforts. The Congress wanted to give assistance to the British in their fight against the Nazi and the Fascist on condition that Britain would declare India free immediately after the war was over. The British Government, however, did not agree to this.

Saadulla had been allowed to form the ministry in Assam on his tacit assurance that he would support Britain's war-efforts in all possible manners. However, the Congress in Assam started a vigorous campaign against the war efforts. In Assam at that time Satyagraha Committees were formed to propagate anti-war message as per direction of Gandhiji and the Congress. This anti-war propaganda in Assam gained much popularity. Again, at this critical time, the newly installed Saadulla ministry was beset with a number of problems. One was the immigration of people from the Eastern part of Bengal. The Assamese viewed this to be a threat to their culture and identity.

But the most important issue from the national standpoint was the contribution of money by the Saadulla Government to the war-fund. Money was deducted from the salary of the government officials. Money was also

raised organizing competitions, shows, etc. The Student community of Assam offered protest against the efforts of the government to raise money for the war-fund. On 6 December, 1941 the students of Cotton College went on a strike. They came out in a procession which was lathi-charged by the police injuring more than 40 college students. This atrocious event sounded the death knell of the Saadulla ministry. Unable to face such protest and denunciation from people all over Assam, Saadulla tendered his resignation as the Chief Minister in 1941.

In the meantime, the situation in the war front had been worsening day by day. The Second World War took a serious turn with the participations of Japan on the side of Germany. Compelled by circumstances the British Government was forced to open negotiation with the Indian leadership. Indeed, Japan's occupation of Singapore and later Burma (Myanmar), on the Eastern border of India, made the British anxious about the security of their Indian Empire. To ensure Indian co-operation the British Government appointed the Cripps Mission to consider some concessions that could be granted to the Indian people. Accordingly, Sir Stafford Cripps visited India in 1942. Cripps' proposals were unacceptable for both the Congress and the Muslim League. Of course, each had rejected the offer on different grounds. The Congress objected to the provision of interim arrangement in which the British were to control the defence of the country. Further, the Congress could see through a conspiracy of Partitioning India in the proposals made by Cripps. Mahatma Gandhi referred to Cripps' offer as a 'Post-dated Cheque' on a crashing bank. The Muslim League rejected the Cripps' offer on the ground that it did not include any provision for the formation of Pakistan. Thus, the Cripps' Mission in India was a failure and it could satisfy none of the political parties.

The news of the defeat and retreat of the Allied Powers coupled with the failure of the Cripps Mission brought about a sudden change in the situation in India. The failure of the Cripps Mission had closed the door for all future negotiations, For Gandhiji, the only possible solution now appeared to be for the British to quit India. The idea was gradually formulated into the Quit India Movement. The Congress Working Committee that met at Wardha

on 14 July 1942 discussed Gandhiji's idea of launching a mass movement in the country demanding the immediate withdrawal of the British power from Indian soil. It adopted a resolution to this effect, which was notified in the All India Congress Committee's session held at Bombay on 7-8 August, 1942. Thus, the Quit India Movement was started in India with the slogan of Do or Die.

Though the Quit India resolution was adopted on 8 August, 1942, the Congress leaders got no time to implement it as most of them including Gandhiji were arrested early in the morning of 9th August, 1942. As a result, protests were raised all over the country against the government action. The sudden arrest of the leaders by the British Government produced instant reaction among the people of Assam as well. There was a mass upsurge in Assam. Gandhiji's slogan 'Do or Die' touched the hearts of the people. However, in Assam, unlike places in the rest of India, the British Government had made elaborate preparation to suppress the movement. Mr. Andrew Clow, the Governor of Assam, first planned not to allow any publicity in Assam to the news of happenings in the others parts of India.

Most of the prominent Congress leaders of Assam were arrested following the adoption of the Quit-India resolution. Md. Tayebulla, Gopinath Bardoloi and Siddhinath Sarma were arrested at Dhubri. Some other leaders such as Pitambar Deb Goswami and Krishna Deb Goswami were also put behind bars. Hem Chandra Baruah was, however, spared due to his ill health. An important feature of the Quit India Movement in Assam was that the people could not, or rather did not; remain non-violent in the face of governmental repression. In the different districts of Assam like Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang, Sibsagar and other places, mob violence took place. People in these places attacked government properties and damaged railway and telegraph lines.

An exemplary act of bravery was shown by Kanaklata Baruah, a young girl of eighteen years. She led a huge crowd with a national tricolour flag in her hand to hoist it at the Gohpur police station. As she proceeded towards the police station the British police fired upon her leading to her death. As she fell down the flag was now taken over by Mukunda Kakati

who also met with the same fate. There are also other instances of police atrocities. Kushal Konwar was hanged to death in the Jorhat jail on an alleged charge of ***sedition***. Kushal Konwar along with five others were accused of causing derailment of a train. People of the Surma Valley also played a key role in the Quit India Movement. People there formed committees through which Satyagraha was conducted. Women of Sylhet also took an active part in the movement. Saralabala and Snehalata were two important leaders who led the women of Sylhet in the movement.

Participation of various sections of people in the August Revolution made it a mass movement. The women of Assam played a memorable role in the Quit India Movement. In the 1942 upheaval, the women of Assam perhaps surpassed all other women of the country in terms of their courage and contributions. Many of them were enrolled as members of the Shanti Sena. Amalprova Das, Puspalata Das, Chandraprava Saikiani and many other women took up organizational works among the people.

Another important aspect of the movement was the underground activities which provided leadership to the activists. In fact, after the arrest of the popular leaders it was the underground movement that kept up the morale of the people. Underground leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali and others visited Assam where they met Hemchandra Barua, Mahendranath Hazarika and others to guide their activities. Of the underground organizations which were locally active in Assam, mention may be made of *Ahimsa Biplavi Sangha* of Barpeta, *Mrityu Bahini* of Nagaon, *Shanti Bahini* of Darrang, etc. In Darrang district, the efficient volunteer organizations like *Shanti Bahini* and *Mrityu Bahini* under the guidance of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala played an important role in mobilizing the people against the British Raj. The pattern of activity of the underground movement was to organize no-tax campaigns, armed rebellion against the British, etc. Emergence of so called Parallel Government was a significant feature of the Quit India Movement in Assam. At Charigao such an independent Rashtra was formed with a Rastrapati (President) in the person of Lakheswar Baruah.

Police atrocities and government repression ultimately succeeded in suppressing the movement. Yet the Quit India Movement marked an

important phase in the freedom struggle of India in terms of popular participation and sacrifice of the people for the national cause. The importance of the movement lies in its popular character. It may be pointed out that the mass upsurge of the movement convinced the British rulers that their hold was sure to collapse in India, sooner or later. The movement marked the last phase of the freedom struggle in India. The British, after 1942 did not risk any confrontation with the people of India.

15.5 GROUPING CONTROVERSY AND INDEPENDENCE

After the World War II, the British Labour Government sent a Cabinet Mission under Sir Patric Lawrence to negotiate with Indian leaders regarding the terms for the transfer of Power to Indians. The Cabinet Mission proposed the establishment of a Constituent Assembly to frame the future Constitution of India. Accordingly elections were held in India in 1946 to form the Constituent Assembly. The plan of the Mission to 'group' Assam with Bengal for creating a predominantly Muslim Zone in Eastern India. People of Assam was strongly opposed to this decision of the Mission. According to this plan the Assam representatives to the Constituent Assembly would have to sit in a Section with the Bengal representatives. The leader of Assam Congress, Gopinath Bordoloi stressed on provincial autonomy, he pleaded the separation of Sylhet district from Assam and Jinnah's claim to include Assam in Pakistan as a Muslim dominated Province, he hold the mission that it was absolutely impossible. On the other hand, Saddulah, leader of the Muslim League in Assam, tried to impress upon the delegation that it was the Muslims who actually constituted the majority of the population in the province. He opposed the idea of transferring only Sylhet to Pakistan instead he suggested that whole province might be attached to Bengal. There was a storm protest against the decision of Cabinet Mission Plan from every corner of Assam. With the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi who supported strongly Assam's stand and ability of Gopinath Bordoloi to convince the other Indian leaders about the justness of Assam's case. This led to the ultimate failure of the Grouping Plan of Cabinet Mission. Meanwhile, Lord Mountbatten was appointed as the last Viceroy of India. He immediately

began to work on a scheme for the partition of India. When power was ultimately transferred by the British government to the people of India on 15th August, 1947, Assam emerged from her subjugation to foreign dominion for twelve decades as a free unit of the Dominion of India which was formally transformed into the Republic of Indian Union. As a result of a referendum, the District of Sylhet in Assam was transferred to Pakistan. Thus with the victory of battle for Freedom included Assam into the republic of Indian union and

Sedition- Actions or speeches which encourage rebellion against the authority of a state or ruler.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Who headed the Cabinet Mission?

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Q 3: In which year did Stafford Cripps visit India?

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Q 4: Mention two underground organizations of Quit India Movement in Assam?

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Q 5: Who was the last Viceroy of India?

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15.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt,

- the impact of the freedom movement in Assam and the participation of Assam in the Non Co-operation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement.



15.7 FURTHER READING

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.



15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a) 1931

b) 1931.

Ans to Q No 2: P. Lawrence.

Ans to Q No 3: 1942.

Ans to Q No 4: Mrityu Bahini, Shanti Bahini.

Ans to Q No 5: Lord Mountbatten.



15.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question in about 50 words)

Q 1: What was the official cause of the Partition of Bengal?

Q 2: In which year Gandhi came to Assam?

Q 3: In which year the resolution of *Purna Swaraj* was passed?

Q 4: Name two martyrs of Quit India Movement of Assam?

B) Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q 1: What is Cunninghum Circular?

Q 2: What role did Assam play in the Quit India Movement?

Q 3: Write short notes on:

a) Partition of Bengal and Assam

b) Participation of students in Non-Cooperation Movement.

C) Long questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the important factors for the rise of Assamese Nationalism.

Q 2: Discuss the effects of the Partition of Bengal in Assam.

Q 3: Explain the impact of Non Co-operation Movement in Assam.

Q 4: Describe the impact of Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam.

Q 5: Discuss the role of students of Assam in the Freedom Struggle.

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