

The anti-Partition and Swadeshi Movement in Assam

Dr. Fakrul Islam Laskar,

Assistant Professor of History,

University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya, India.

Email: fakruldu@gmail.com

Abstract

The anti-Partition and Swadeshi movement had its both national and provincial facets. While the partition of Bengal in 1905 provoked indignation throughout India, the provincial and in some cases the local issues also undoubtedly determined the nature and extent of the particular responses. The people of Bengal advocated for a united province while the people of Bihar and Orissa wanted separate provinces. Assam had special reason to be feared as it had now been added with the districts of Eastern Bengal. In 1874, when Assam was separated, it was expected that the separation of the province would give an opportunity to the Chief Commissioner to have a close supervision and he could adopt necessary steps for improving the backward condition of the province. But the people of Assam had the fear that by tagging the province once again with the much advanced districts of Bengal would nullify all the good that had been realized during the time of Chief Commissionership. The innate desire of the Assamese people living in the Brahmaputra Valley to preserve their distinct identity brought them to the anti-partition movement.

Keywords: Swadeshi, boycott, anti-partition, Bengal, Assam.

The readjustment and the redistribution proposals of the territories of Bengal had been raised as early as the 1860s.¹ The territorial readjustment of Bengal was in fact a long standing issue but the Orissa famine of 1866 and the human loss therein, in large numbers, attracted the notice of the Secretary of State and of the Government of India to the shortcomings of the existing system of government in Bengal.² So, after the famine, Sir Strafford Northcote, the Secretary of State for India, came with a suggestion to reduce the size of vast presidency of Bengal on the grounds of administrative convenience. The presidency of Bengal at that time included apart from Bengal proper, the whole of Bihar, Orissa and Assam.³ For administrative effectiveness, the proposal to separate Assam, Cachar, hill areas and the contiguous districts

from Bengal also came from Sir John Lawrence, the Governor General of India (1864-69) in 1868.⁴ So, in 1874, Assam, Sylhet, Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills, and the other hill districts, were at last separated from Bengal and the Chief Commissionership of Assam was constituted. The attaching of Sylhet and Cachar districts to Assam had economic reason as it was expected that the surplus revenue of these two districts would make the economy of Assam Valley viable.⁵ Even after the separation of Assam together with three Bengali speaking districts of Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet from Bengal in 1874, Bengal was still the most populous province in British India with a population of about 78.5 million and an area occupying approximately 189,900 square miles. Thus, the scheme of reducing the size of Bengal had again been raised because such a vast province could not be properly governed by a single person.⁶

With strategic and administrative motive, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, the Chief Commissioners of Burma and Assam and the military experts came forward with a proposal in 1892 of transferring the Chittagong Division and the Lushai Hills to Assam. But their proposal remained unimplemented. Sir William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1885-1887, 1891-1896), again in 1896 proposed the transfer of Chittagong Division and the two districts of Mymensingh and Dacca to Assam.⁷ Sir Andrew Frazer (1848 – 1919), the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, in 1903 revived the earlier proposal of transferring Chittagong Division, Dacca and Mymensingh districts to Assam and this time he got the support of J. B. Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1902–05). Fuller supported the territorial changes for speedy completion of the Assam-Bengal Railways (about five-sevenths of its length lying within the boundary of Assam) and also for the development of the port of Chittagong.⁸ The Government of India finally on 19 July 1905 declared its decision to set up a new province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' with Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi division, Hill Tippera, Malda and Assam. The formal announcement was made on September 1, and Bengal was partitioned on October 16, 1905.⁹

The partition of Bengal and the forming of a new province gave a rude shock to the public feelings in Bengal. The people of Bengal started anti-partition and Swadeshi Movement in order to undoing the partition. The Swadeshi Movement with its spirit of nationalism and patriotism and with a plan of boycotting British goods turned Bengal into a ground of anti-British activities that spread even outside Bengal also. During the Swadeshi Movement, the cult

of terrorism also got a momentum and the anarchist organizations and the secret revolutionary societies were constituted at various places in Bengal. A number of Bengal anarchists entered into Assam as well and tried to have their hold over the youth of Assam. Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967), Bishnuram Medhi (1888-1981) and many other young men seemed to have come under the influence of anarchism for a while.¹⁰

In Assam, the initial response to the partition scheme was limited to the urban areas where the Bengali speaking population was in majority.¹¹ Later on, however, Assamese elite too actively participated in the agitation and the press and the socio-political organizations like the *Assam Association* (1903)¹² and the *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* (1884)¹³ also condemned the partition scheme and protested in an unambiguous way although the reasons were different.¹⁴ It was expected that the separation of the province in 1874 would give an opportunity to the Chief Commissioner to have a close supervision and he could adopt necessary steps for improving the backward condition of the province. Indeed, within a period of thirty years, much improvement had been done in Assam under the Chief Commissionership in communication, education, cultivation and in various other fields and it had been thankfully acknowledged.¹⁵ But the people of Assam had the fear that by tagging the province once again with the much advanced districts of Bengal would nullify all the good that had been realized during the time of Chief Commissionership.¹⁶

The people of both the valleys of Assam- the Assam Valley (districts of present day Brahmaputra Valley) and the Surma Valley (districts of Sylhet and Cachar) responded to the call of the Bengal leaders. *The Bengalee* reported that the 16th October, 1905 was observed as a day of mourning at Gauripur and the country around on account of the partition of the Bengal. *Rakhi Bandhan* had also been adopted universally.¹⁷ Apart from Gauripur, the *Rakhi Bandhan* ceremony was performed on that day at Dhubri and Dibrugarh of Assam Valley also.¹⁸

The anti-partition day anniversary was observed at various places in Assam on October 16, 1906. The 16th October, 1906 was dully observed at Dhubri by fasting, performing *Rakhi Bandhan* and even there was no cooking in many houses. There was also public *sankirtan* which was heartily joined by Mohammedans, Hindus and Sikhs.¹⁹ A grand public meeting was reported from Goalpara presided over by Maulvi Abdul Aziz where resolutions renewing the *Swadeshi* vow and to carry on the agitation till partition was annulled or modified were passed and the first

being moved by a Mohammedan.²⁰ The Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm at Dibrugarh. Hindus including Assamese and Mohammedans gathered barefooted at *Ghat* before sunrise and observed *Rakhi Bandhan*. At the evening, a grand procession composed mainly of Assamese and Mohammedans crossed through the street singing national anthem and shouting *Alla-ho-Akbar* and *Bande Mataram*. There were great indignations at Nawab Salimullah (1871-1915) for his attempt to create a division between the Hindus and the Mohammedans and so two effigies of Nawab were made of which one was buried by the Mohammedans while the other one was burnt by the Hindus. While at Gauhati, a Mohammedan boy joining in a procession that was taken place in the afternoon of 16th October implored his co-religionists to join the Hindus for the political regeneration of India.²¹

On 16th October, 1906, a meeting, attended by the Hindus and the Mohammedans, was held at Badarpur Railway Station under the presidency of Kazi Abdul Karim where the president gave his audience the details of the cause of *Swadeshi*. The *Rakhi Bandhan* ceremony was performed by both Hindus and Muslims and fasted for the whole day without touching a drop of water and on that Muslims played the major part.²²

The frequent visit made by Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932) to Habiganj, Baniachang, Badarpur, Silchar and Karimganj and the stirred speeches delivered there helped in spreading the message of *Swaraj* to the common people.²³ In an open air meeting held at Habiganj on 12th February, 1907, Pal expressed his glad hearing the news that *belati* goods were scarcely procurable at the Habiganj bazaar.²⁴ The Inspector of Habiganj reported that Bipin Chandra Pal while speaking on the boycotting foreign goods in a meeting held at the compound of Baniachang High School on 15th February, 1907, in front of 1,000 people including students and a few Mohammedans of the lower classes, mentioned the English as ‘half-rulers and half-traders’ and said that if the Indians started avoiding the use of *belati* goods, it would destroy the half of the powers of the foreigners.²⁵ In another meeting which was taken place in the afternoon of 14th February, 1907 in a field near the house of Babu Govinda Lal Das, a *mirasdar* and a merchant at Masalia, a village quite close to Habiganj, Bipin Chandra Pal told the Mohammedans who were present at that meeting that “Government had made many professions of favour towards them but they would be labouring under a delusion if they placed any reliance on these promises, as nothing substantial had yet been done for them”. He also informed the Mohammedans that the

main motive of 'these professions' was only to create a fracture between the Hindus and the Mohammedans.²⁶ He also visited Silchar and Badarpur in March 1907 and during that visit he talked on *Swadeshi* industries at Mahadev Bari of Badarpur and on 'spiritual emancipation' and 'national independence' while addressing an audience at Janiganj Bazar in Silchar.²⁷ The visit of Pal in the different parts of Surma Valley not only helped in spreading the message of *Swaraj* but it also helped in popularizing the concept of *Swadeshi* in the Surma Valley.

In Assam Valley, the involvement of the religious figures in the *Swadeshi* cause could also be witnesses. The chief priest of the Kamakhya temple located in Gauhati appealed to the *pandas*, the grocers and the sweetmeat sellers not to accept foreign goods nor sell these items in the adjoining areas of the Nilachal (Kamakhya temple) hills. New shops were established in various places to sell only the *Swadeshi* items. As per the Government reports, four such shops had been started in Gauhati. These were the Assam Valley Trading Company, Munshi Taibali, B. N. Dey & Co., Brajanath Pandit.²⁸

In Sylhet, responding to the call of Bipin Chandra Pal to boycott the government schools, forty students came out of their schools. To meet the need of these students, the Sylhet National School was established in October 1907 on voluntary contributions. The school was started at the residence of Sachindra Chandra Singh, the editor of the *Weekly Chronicle*. It had four buildings and playground close to Jinda Bazar. The school had ayurvedic and carpentry classes and also followed the syllabus and examinations laid down by the National Educational Committee, Calcutta. The similar schools had also been started at Habiganj, Srimangal, Baniachang and Lokhai.²⁹

Although we find the establishment of National School at Sylhet to fulfill the requirement of the students boycotting the government schools, we do not find any such institution coming up in the Assam Valley. However, when there were efforts for a national University in Calcutta, a branch of the 'Association for the Advancement of Scientific and Industrial Education of the Indians' was initiated at Dibrugarh and it got the necessary help and co-operation. Likewise, funds were collected at Tezpur for the 'Society of Agricultural and Industrial Education'.³⁰

It was noticed that political leaflets and pamphlets were widely and regularly circulated among the students. Even the students were required to commit to memory the patriotic songs of

Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*. There was an exhibition at the Habiganj National School in 1909 where nitric acid and hydrochloric acid prepared by the students were exhibited. Besides this, the paintings on Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghose and Ajit Singh were also shown. The National Schools in Sylhet were used like those in East Bengal as centres for spreading the anti-Partition agitation.³¹

The student community, thus, played an important role in the Swadeshi movement in Assam. They were at the forefront of the Swadeshi campaign and remained effective in places like Barpeta, Tezpur in the matter of popularizing the use of Swadeshi items. Their role was vital in the urban areas of the both the valleys in organizing meetings and demonstrations. But the Government was alarmed of their activities and R. W. Carlyle, the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government, issued a confidential circular to the District Magistrates and Collectors. He directed them to take severe action against the educational institutions if they failed to prevent their students from participating in anti-Government activities.³²

The Assam Press also condemned the partition from the point of view of the Assamese interest. According to them, "the situation of Assam when amalgamated with the Sylhet district was bad enough, but when tied to advanced parts of the country, such as Dacca and Rajshahi, the change was from the frying pan to the fire."³³ The *Advocate of Assam* criticized the partition on financial ground and held the view that the new province would be acting "as a sort of drag on the exhausted Indian exchequer".³⁴ The papers requested for special concession to Assam, a poor and continuously neglected province.³⁵ The *Assam Banti* stated that the Assamese were deprived of their legitimate share in the loaves and fishes of offices as these were snatched from them by the outsiders and so appealed to the Government to restore their just rights to them.³⁶ The attitude towards Swadeshi Movement was, however, different and it was supported and complimented by those vernacular papers which saw it a means to fight the growing poverty in India. The *Times of Assam* commended the movement for its encouragement of plain living in Assam.³⁷

Because of the strong protest and the consequent Swadeshi Movement, the Government finally withdrew the partition in 1911 and the East Bengal and the West Bengal were again reunited.³⁸ Assam, as a result, including Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara again came under a Chief Commissioner with a legislative council of its own at Shillong and in 1921 it got the status of a

Governor's province.³⁹ The Assamese papers welcomed the separation of Assam from Eastern Bengal but wanted the separation of Sylhet from Assam as they feared that if Sylhet remained with Assam then the Sylhet people would dominate the Secretariat Offices and the other public services under the Assam Administration.⁴⁰ While in Sylhet it was considered a deep injury inflicted on them by tagging Sylhet once again with Assam led to an agitation for retaining Sylhet in Bengal.⁴¹

There is no doubt that the anti-partition agitation in the Surma Valley took the shape of a popular movement based on Swadeshi, boycott and national education. In the Assam Valley, the movement mostly confined to urban areas where Bengali population was in majority. The anti-partition agitation achieved its prime goal of unsettling the settled fact and got the partition annulled. After the Revolt of 1857, the agitation against the Partition of Bengal and the consequent Swadeshi Movement would be the first opportunity for the people of Assam to involve in any major political activities. So participation in anti-partition agitation activities was a great experience for the people of Assam. The partition of Bengal and the consequent circumstances made them politically conscious and whose affect had been seen in later period. The lessons of the anti-Partition and the Swadeshi movement helped the Indians in the next phases of the national movement.

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