

National freedom struggle :

In Barak-Surma Valley of Assam

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Freedom struggle actually had its beginnings in both the valleys of Assam in the constitutional strivings for reforms and say of Indians in the affairs of the country's governance. Naturally the English educated emerging middle class was the pioneer and the pathfinder in that campaign.

However, it would be wrong to ignore the contributions of martyrs like Maniram Dewan, Baadur Gaonburah and several others who had raised the banner of revolt immediately after the first war of India's independence waged by the brave sepoys in the East India Company's army. But the support or sympathy for the mutineer sepoys was not widespread as both the newly educated class and the ignorant masses remained insulated from any influence of the rebel sepoys. The British Indian authorities of the East India Company could easily crush the march of the mutineers towards Assam and Manipur at Latu in Sylhet district and the escaping mutineers and their family members-wives and children were hounded and killed inside the jungle by the highlanders inhabiting the forest areas. The tale of woes on the mutineers in the Surma valley is one of the saddest chapters of our history. But the spark that was ignited by the patriotic sepoys survived in the memory of the people and that saga inspired generations of freedom fighters half a century later.

Aspirations for reforms

The Indian National Congress formed in Bombay in 1885 gave expression to the strivings for reforms of the English educated middle class. Although the first session of the Congress in Bombay in 1885 was mainly attended by selected individuals from the three major presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, the voice of Assam was also heard. Of course there was no system of sending delegates and none attended from Assam. (In fact, the system of electing delegates began only in the following year when the second session was held in Calcutta in 1886).

But even in 1885, it is remarkable that a public meeting was held in Assam under the presidentship of Ananda Mohan Bose, a very distinguished public figure from Bengal, and a resolution supporting the objects of the Congress was sent by a telegram to the organisers of the session in Bombay revealing the interest of the Assam people and their association with the aim of the Congress.

The emergence of a large number of organisations representing geographical locations characterised the last part of the 19th century in Assam. At the second session of the Congress in Calcutta (1886) the representation was on that line. For example, Debi Charan Baruah and Gopinath Bordoloi represented the Upper Assam Association. Shillong Association was represented by Kalikanta Barkakoti, Nowgong Ryot Association by Satyanath Borah; Bipin Chandra Pal represented Sylhet Association and Joygobinda Shome and Kamini Kumar Chanda represented the Habiganj Peoples' Association. Gopinath Bordoloi should not be confused with Gopinath Bordoloi from Dibrugarh because Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam after independence, was not even born in 1886.

At the third session of the Congress at Madras (1887) the following representatives from Assam were present : Radhanath Changkakoti from the Upper Assam Association; Lakshmi Kanta Barkakoti from the Assam Conference and Bipin Chandra Pal from Sylhet as the editor of *The Tribune*, Lahore.

The condition of abject slavery of the tea plantation workers of Assam and the saga of their sufferings and misery owing to the permanently indentured state were carried to the Congress session held at Bombay in 1889. Bipin Chandra Pal and Jogesh Chandra Ghosh (Calcutta) presented before the delegates a vivid picture of how the plantation workers were forced to lead a sub-human life. Thanks to their efforts, the Congress adopted a resolution protesting against such atrocious treatment meted out to tea workers and their family members.

Thus, Assam also participated in the emerging nation-consciousness of India for a fair share in the management of the country's affairs. And in this endeavour, both the valleys of the province took part. The 19th century ended amidst strivings for reforms.

The dawn of the 20th century saw the emergence of a more radical younger generation that did not keep itself confined to the limits of constitutionalism. The partition of Bengal in 1905 gave further fillip to that trend with sections of youth taking vow of snatching freedom from the yoke of foreign rule through force. Although their number was small in Assam, some young men from both the valleys took up arms in close cooperation with revolutionary patriots from neighbouring Bengal.

The contribution of the Surma Valley Association and the Arunachal Ashram (of Thakur Dayananda) in the germination and growth of the national freedom movement in the Surma Barak Valley has to be recorded in letters of gold. The Surma Valley Association founded on August 11, 1906 was on the vanguard of the movement for arousing awareness of freedom. The first conference of the Surma Valley Association held at Jalsuka in Sylhet district in 1906 under the presidentship of Kamini Kumar Chanda, a prominent lawyer and leader of Silchar, was attended by about two hundred delegates. Its emphasis was on the Swadeshi movement.

The second conference of the Surma Valley Association held at Karimgang in April 1908 under the presidentship of Radha Binode Das affirmed the ideal of the Association as "Swaraj" preached by Dadabhi Naoroji in the Calcutta Session of the Congress in 1906. Bipin Chandra Pal, who also addressed the second conference of the Surma Valley Association, asserted that "Swaraj" was the goal of India without which humanity would suffer.

The Arunachal Ashram founded at Masimpur near Silchar by Thakur Dayananda (known earlier as Gurudas Choudhury) became another important institution for preaching awareness of freedom, peace and universal brotherhood. It has two branches - Gauri Gauranga Ashram at Dinajpur (Bengal) and Jagatshi Ashram in Maulavi Bazar.

The Ashram had a mouthpiece of its own, the *Praja Shakti* published under the editorship of Mohendra Nath De, a highly educated young man of his time and published from Habiganj.

On suspicion of the Ashram's role in anti-British struggle for freedom, the police accompanied by para-military forces, raided the Jagatshi Ashram on July 8, 1912 and during the raid, Mohendra Nath De was hit by a police bullet and killed.

Thakur Dayananda, the founder of the Arunachal Mission and the Kali Temple at Masimpur near Silchar, suffered in the hands of the imperialists. But this never discouraged Dayananda from raising the voice for 'a parliament of the world and a federation of man kind'. He sent a cable to the French city of Versailles in 1918 pleading for a just peace when the victorious Allied Powers were forcing an unfair peace treaty on the vanquished Axis Powers. If Dayananda's message was given a little credence, the seeds of the new world would not have remained in the peace treaty that ended the World War I.

Undoubtedly, the Arunachal Mission blazed a new trail in the country's freedom struggle. Similarly, a large number of young men and very few women engaged themselves in the path of revolutionary patriotism. Most of them suffered imprisonment and other sorts of indignities and tortures in silence. Very little record about them is available. Two stalwarts from Manipur-Rani Gaidinliu from Tamenglong and Hijam Irabot Singh from Imphal Valley - plunged themselves in the freedom struggle in the Surma - Barak Valley and brought about unity and consolidation of the hills and the plains. H. K. Bawichhuaka, a Mizo leader, was exiled by the Britishers because the foreign rulers were apprehensive of combined uprising in the hills and the plains with the approaching Japanese and the INA forces coming closer to the border.

The Salt Satyagraha call given by Gandhiji found sympathetic response in the Surma Barak Valley. Bidhubhushan Choudhury of Sylhet left for the sea coast for offering Satyagraha by making self-defying the ban of imperialist rulers.

Bidhubhushan Choudhury was a prominent journalist of his time and died in July 1975 in harness as the Editor of the Bengali weekly *Jugashakti* published from Karimgang.

Khilafat movement

The struggle for “Swaraj” or national independence passed through different phases in the Barak-Surma Valley also along with the rest of the province of Assam and the country during the 20s and 30s of the present century. There was unprecedented response from the Muslim clerics and masses during the Khilafat Movement jointly launched by Mahatma Gandhi and the All Brothers (Shaukat Ali and Mohammad Ali). Thousands courted arrest for the restoration of the Khilafat in Turkey and the overthrow of the British rule. The same spirit pervaded both the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements launched at the call of Gandhiji.

However in the interest of truth and objectivity, it must be recorded in this connection that at least on the the tallest patriots and writers of his time, Bipin Chandra Pal, differed with Gandhiji’s support to the reactionary Khilafat Movement and openly opposed capitulation before such pernicious concepts overthrown in Ottoman Turkey by secular and modernist Father of Modern Turkey, Kamal Ataturk.

The relevance and justification of Bipin Chandra Pal’s opposition to the Khilafat Movement notwithstanding, the movement drove Muslim masses into a rebellious mood against the British Indian rulers. To the extent, it cemented a bond of unity among Hindus and Muslims. It is a different matter that this unity was shortlived and the course of future history of the world corroborated the assessment of Bipin Chandra Pal. The seeds of communal disunity of the future had remained entrenched in the unty of the Khilafat agitation.

Jamiat

At the same time, the history of the period would be incomplete without recording the positive role played by nationalist Muslims under the leadership of Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind. Even in the heyday of Muslim League politics when not a single Muslim seat in the Assam Legislative Assembly could be won by the nationalists in the Brahmaputr Valley, five seats in the Surma-Barak Valley could be retained by nationalist Muslim leaders like Maulavi Abdul Matib Majumdar (Hailakandi) Maulana Ibrahim Chautali (Jayantiapur), Maulana Abdur Rashid (Sylhet). This was no mean achievement for Muslim leaders owing allegiance to Shaikh-ul-Hind Maulana Syed Ahmed Madani as they were not allowed to say prayer in mosques or join in other Muslim festivals because of the excommunicating spree of large majority of co-religionists following dictates of Mohammad Ali Jinnah-led Muslim League.

Last phase

In early 1941, the Congress programme of individual satyagraha was also followed in the Surma-Barak Valley. Karunasindhu Roy was the first to offer such satyagraha in the Surma Valley. At Silchar, Arun Kumar Chanda, Bar-at-Law and MLA (Assam), deputy leader of the Congress Legislature Party, courted arrest and was convicted and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment with a fine of Rs. 100/- He was unconditionally released from the Sylhet jail on health grounds of March 28, 1941.

Arun Kumar Chanda was one of the most prominent freedom fighters of the state, Due to repeated incarceration, his health deteriorated and he died a premature death in 1946.

Sacrifice of the large number of courageous men and dedicated women characterised the long and winding course of freedom struggle through which the villages and town areas of the Barak-Surma Valley progressed during a century or so. The roll of honour contains thousands of names while the supreme sacrifice in silence of many others went unrecorded and unsung. That, however, does not wipe out their contribution to the cause for which they gave their today for our tomorrow.

Among the prominent names of patriots of the Barak-Surma valley are the following : Bipin Chandra Pal, Sarachchandra Choudhury, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, Joygobinda Shome, Shyamacharan Dev, Biplabi Sushil Sen, Asit Bhattacharya, Arun Kumar Chanda, Purnendu Sengupta, Gopen Roy (detained in Andaman Island), Achintya Bhattacharya (as eminent Marxist leader), Brajendra Narayan Choudhury, Biresw Mishra, Durgapada Das, Mahitosh Purkayastha, Tarapada Bhattacharjee, Premendra Mohan Goswami, Mr. Kaliprasanna Bhattacharjee, Umasankar Patoa, Jyotirmoy Sen, Dr. Brajendra Bhattacharjee, Maulabi Abdul Matlib Majumber, Maulana Ibrahim Choutali, Dharendra

Kumar Gupta, Satindra Mohan Dev, Sajoy Das, Monomohan Bhattacharjee, Nirendra Nath Dev, Sachindra Mohal Dutta (Lakhu), Rothindra Nath Sen, Nirode Gupta, Dhiren Dutta, Kaliraman Bhattacharjee, Karuna Sindhu Roy, Bidyapati Singha.

Conclusion

The struggle for freedom in our country has left an indelible impression that India's territorial unity and emotional integration despite diversity of geography and ethnicity would be of lasting value. The same impression gets strengthened as we look back into the recorded and unrecorded history of our freedom struggle in any part of the country. The Barak-Surma Valley of Assam is no exception as the heroic story of the sacrifice of its known and unknown freedom fighters gets unfolded before the eyes of dispassionate observers and keen students. We must in all humility salute all those who had sacrificed 'their today for our tomorrow'.