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Assam connections of Mahatma Gandhi during Freedom Movement

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Introduction:

Gandhiji had paid four visits to Assam. His first visit was in 1921 during which he spread the message of the Non-cooperation movement. His second visit was in 1926 described as a khadi tour, as he focused attention on explaining the significance and need of khadi work during this tour. His third visit was in 1934 described as the Harijan tour during which he spoke about removal of untouchability. His fourth and last tour was in 1946 during which he inaugurated the Assam branch of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. There was great significance of his tour to Assam and each tour has some speciality.

Keywords : Gandhiji, Assam, Connection, Freedom, Significance

Methodology:

The method of data collection for the present study has been from secondary sources. The secondary sources have been the historical study on Mahatma Gandhi and Indian freedom movement from the sources such as published books, articles, journals and other documents.

Objectives:

The objectives of the study have been to know Assam connections of Mahatma Gandhi; to find the significance of his visits to Assam; and to know the Assamese leaders participation in the Indian freedom movement during his time.

Results:

Gandhiji had Assam connection for the cause of Indian freedom. He spread the message of swadeshi, non-violence and inspired Indians to fight against British colonialism in India. The first tour of Mahatma Gandhi was during the time of non-cooperation movement. In 1921 he was invited by Congress leaders of Assam. During his 12 days visit (18th to 30th August, 1921) he visited Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet. This visit of Gandhiji proved to be a stimulating experience for the Assamese masses. There was a weighty response to his suggestion for non-cooperation and the message had spread to the remote areas of the province and it became a strong weapon of the Assamese people. At Gauhati a biggest public meeting was held in a field before the

residence of Tarunram Phukan at Bharalumukh. In this meeting about 25 thousand people had listened to Gandhiji's lecture. The meeting was overloaded with zealous patriotic sentiments. After the end of the meeting in the evening, ceremonial burning of foreign clothes was a very remarkable moment of that public gathering. During the tour in every meeting big or small, he always inspired the masses by the message of Swadeshi.

During the Non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 British repression had been going on and the jails were filled up with the political prisoners. The leaders of the Non-cooperation Movement of Assam viz., Nabinchandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Gaurikanta Talukdar, Hariprasad Brahmchari, Debendranath Uzir, Dhaniram Talukdar and Md. Tayebulla were arrested, yet the flora of Non-cooperation Movement had not an end, it was going on by the local leaders. But after the Chauri-Chaura riots in U.P. Gandhiji called a halt to the Non-cooperation Movement. In Assam also the flora of Non-cooperation Movement had stopped, but the local Assamese leaders had laid stress on the constructive programmes, like spinning of yarns and wearing of Khaddar, prohibition of opium etc.

There were police atrocities on the Assamese people during the Non-cooperation Movement. The thirty sixth session of the Indian National Congress was held on 27-28 December, 1921 where the representatives of Assam joined and reported to the national leadership on the police brutalities in Assam. For the spot study of the situation Gandhiji sent Madan Mohan Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad as his emissaries to Assam. On 28th May 1922, they came to Assam and on 3rd June they left Gauhati. The committee substantially confirmed the facts of the brutalities committed by the Government and its agencies on the people of Assam during the period of Non-cooperation Movement.

The 2nd tour of Gandhiji to Assam is known as 'Khadi tour'. However, the main occasion was concerned with the Congress session held at Pandu in Guwahati. He visited Assam on 26th to 28th December, 1926. The Congress session at Pandu was presided over by Srinivas Iyengar. While in Guwahati, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of Brahmaputra. He compared Brahmaputra to Thames of London in superiority and said that he had seen the glittering scenes of Thames in London, but he could not recall any scene like the one sitting on the bank of Brahmaputra which he was writing the notes.

This Congress session at Pandu was significant historically as the Congress workers of Assam set a target of collecting 10,000 yards of khadi with a view to erect the main pandal with khadi cloth only. This target was achieved as few neighbouring districts of Assam were approached and the families of these districts were assigned the task of producing a specific quantity of khadi. This motivated the national leaders to see pandals of Congress sessions in future of khadi only. Later on it became a tradition for the Congress.

The Gauhati session of the Congress left an important message in the minds of the Assamese people. It was a landmark in the history of Assam that the messages of the central leaders not only inspired the Assamese people to prepare themselves for the future path of struggle, but also re-affirmed

strong contact of Assam with the rest of India. The successful celebration of the session had proved the organizing ability of the Assamese people.

In 1929 at the historic Lahore Session of Congress 'complete Independence' was unanimously proclaimed to be the goal of the Congress and on 26th January, 1930 to be observed as 'Independence Day' in all over the country. The Assam Congress leaders on 26th January, 1930 celebrated the Independence Day both in Brahmaputra and Borak valleys.

After observance of the 'Independence Day' Gandhiji announced that he would have a march to break one of the greatest broadly disliked laws in British India that gave the state a market in the production and sale of salt. Gandhiji's picketing of the salt monopoly was another example of his strategic knowledge. He started his Civil-disobedience Movement by setting out on 12th March from Sabarmati, accompanied by 79 selected followers to march 240 miles to the sea beach at Dandi near Ahmedabad. From Assam Leeladhar Baruah of North Gauhati had joined the Dandi March of Gandhiji. After the historic Dandi March the APCC had followed the directive of AICC and was also ready to initiate a mass Civil-disobedience Movement in Assam. The APCC had also followed the general outline of the all India movement of 1930-32 by defence of repressive laws and rules and boycott of foreign goods.

The main objective of the Dandi March was violation of salt regulations by making salt in native way. But in Assam there was no sea. So in Assam, Forest Laws were also violated in lieu of salt satyagraha. On 22nd March, 1930 in one public meeting Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury had appealed to the masses for starting the Civil-disobedience Movement by violating the Forest Law. Bishnuram Medhi, the president of the APCC, had conducted the movement very sincerely. In his mission he was fully associated by Hem Chandra Barua, an outstanding personality of the Congress organisation, Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua, Omeo Kumar Das, Siddhinath Sarma, Debeswar Sarma, Rajendra Nath Barua, Harendra Chandra Chowdhury, Lakshmidhar Sarma and many others. In the movement women like Chandraprova Saikiani, Durgaprova Bora and others had also joined and the participation of these women had strengthened the course of the movement. On the other hand younger Congress leaders like Bijoy Chandra Bhagavati, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Debendranath Sarma, Lakshmidhar Bora, Dwarikanath Goswami and Puma Sarma also come to initiative the Civil-disobedience Movement.

During the Civil-disobedience Movement on 5th May 1930 Gandhiji was arrested and the peasants, workers and students of Assam had protested the arrest. Demonstrations were held in the various places of the province. The course of the Civil-disobedience Movement had been going on in full swing in Assam to the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 1931.

On 1st January 1932 a meeting of the Congress Working Committee decided to renew the Civil-disobedience Movement. The British police force again arrested Gandhiji on 4th January, 1932. The British administration declared the Congress as an illegal party. The Assam Provincial Congress also joined the second phase of the Civil-disobedience Movement in full swing. The campaign dragged till May, 1934, when it was abandoned.

His third visit to Assam was in 1934, during which he focused mainly on removal of untouchability as he believed it was a curse to the Hindu society. This tour of Gandhiji to Assam is known as 'Harijan tour'. The mission of Harijan upliftment gave an impetus to the constructive programme of the Congress which continued to be pursued in the rural areas.

After his Harijan tour to Assam following the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935, elections were announced in eleven Indian provinces, including Assam. Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Assam were held in 1937 and Sir Muhammad Saadulla was installed as the first Chief Minister on 1st April, 1937 to 18th September, 1938. After his resignation, the Bordoloi Ministry came to power from 19th September, 1938 to 16th November, 1939. After the resignation of the Bordoloi Ministry, Syed Saadulla again came to power in Assam and remained in office till December 1941.

The individual Satyagraha Campaign of Congress went on smoothly and by the end of 1941 the Second World War approached the gates of India. After the failure of the Cripps Mission, on 8th August, 1942 the Congress Working Committee (CWC) adopted the famous Quit India resolution.

Assam had played a key role in the Quit India Movement of 1942. The sudden arrest of the national leaders including Gandhiji by the British Government produced instant reaction among the people of Assam. There was a mass upsurge in Assam because of the Quit India Movement. Gandhiji's slogan "Do or die" touched the very core of hearts of the people. The Governor of Assam, Mr. Andrew Clow, first planned not to allow any publicity in Assam to the news of happenings in the other parts of India. Kuishal Konwar, Kanaklata Barua, Moniram Dewan, Mukunda Kakati, Bhugeswari Phukanani, Hemoram Pator, Monbor Nath, Mojiram Boro, Ratan Kachari, Kumoli Devi, Kolai Koch, Tilak Deka etc. were martyred. The prominent leaders of Assam, viz. Md. Tayebullah, Bishuram Medhi, Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed, Debeswar Sarma, Dr. Harekrishna Das, Liladhar Barua and some others were arrested on the 9th August, 1942. After returning from attending the AICC meeting in Bombay, Gopinath Bordoloi and Siddhinath Sarma were also arrested. After that Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Haladhar Bhuyan, Bijoy Chandra Bhagavati, Motiram Bora, Mahendra Nath Hazarika, Puma Chandra Sarma, Pitambar Dev Goswami, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Jyotiprosad Agarwala, Sriman Prafulla Goswami, Mahadev Sarma, Rajendranath Barua, Hari Narayan Barua, Beliram Das, Jinaram Das and others were arrested. At that time of Quit India Movement, the organization Santi Sena by the Congress leaders of Assam had played a very key role for organizing people at the village level.

The 4th tour of Gandhiji was related to the issue of groupings of the country made by colonial rulers in 1946. This was his last visit. During this visit he inaugurated the Assam branch of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust and a Gram Sevikas Vidyalaya. This is the only branch in India that was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi himself. Gandhiji assigned the responsibility of managing this branch to Late Amalprava Das. He had stayed during this visit on a small hillock known as Sarania, owned by Dr. Harekrishna Das, father of Amalprava Das, a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. This hillock was finally donated by Dr. Das and his family for accommodating the Gram Sevika Vidyalaya and other activities. This hillock was surrounded by the dwellings of poverty stricken people of

Guwahati. Gandhiji had desired to stay in the midst of poor people and so a small hut was constructed specially for him. All the elderly stalwarts of Congress led by Dr Harekrishna Das, Gopinath Bordoloi, Dr Bhubaneswar Barua themselves participated in the construction of this hut prepared with bamboo posts and thatched roof and plastered with mud. This hallowed structure has been kept intact in its original structure and the Gram Sevikas Vidyalaya continues to run on this hillock till today.

Discussion:

Gandhiji's Assam connections seem to be very fruitful for the interest of Assam. His visits encouraged the Assamese people to participate actively in the national movement for freedom. His role was in favour of Assam when the Cabinet Mission scheme was published on 16th May 1946. According to the scheme a major portion of Assam was to be apportioned to the then proposed East Pakistan. The people of Assam in general and their leaders in particular were highly disturbed to learn about the same. Unfortunately the grouping scheme suggested by Cabinet Mission was given consent by the Congress Working Committee. Heard to it from Gopinath Bordoloi along with Reverend Nichols Roy met Gandhiji and shared their great unhappiness over the scheme. Gopinath Bordoloi informed Gandhiji that the Congress Working Committee had given consent to this plan. He further informed him that as a Congressman he was in a dilemma about his duty in the face of a Congress decision. Gandhiji asked Bordoloi 'what does your conscience say?' Bordoloi replied that he was not in favour of that decision. Gandhiji then advised him to go to the working committee and protest against that decision and assured him of his firm support to that stand and the people of Assam. In December, 1946, Mahendra Mohan Chopudhury and Bijoy Chandra Bhagavati met Gandhiji at Srirampur on behalf of Bordoloi and placed Assam's issue before him to seek his advice at this crucial crisis. Gandhiji had encouraged these two leaders of Assam. Ultimately the national leaders and British functionaries were compelled to alter the scheme. The final outcome was that Assam remained with India.

Conclusion:

The tour of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam had always been of great significance so far, strengthening the base of the national movement for freedom. Till his visits, Assam was in its regional cocoon. Gandhiji's visits helped it to pull itself out of the cocoon and it provided a new link to cement the emotional bonds between Assam and the people of rest of India with which the national movement also got strengthened. Moreover the Swadeshi movement in the form of khadi works that the Pandu session of the congress had shown was a landmark for the Indian freedom struggle in Assam. He made khadi an integral part and an icon of the Swadeshi movement. His Harijan tour was important as Gandhiji himself regarded untouchability as a blot on Hinduism and wanted to do away with it completely. Without the removal of it Swaraj is a meaningless term. Mahatma Gandhi gave great importance to the region, the people and works amongst them.

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