



GOPINATH BORDOLOI AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO ASSAM

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Abstract: Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, a leader with vision whose diverse life's story embodies unwavering dedication, a rare spirit of sacrifice, a rock-solid determination to fight injustice in all of its manifestations, closeness to people, and a humane demeanour. Lokapriya, as he is referred to by his followers, is one of the legendary figures who helped to forge Assam's future and symbolized the Assamese people's unique culture, ethos, and aspirations. His most notable accomplishment was the pivotal part he played on the eve of independence when he fiercely resisted the "Grouping Scheme" and made sure that Assam merged with India.

Key note: economy, political, colonial, independence.

INTRODUCTION:

Bordoloi's contribution to the Province beginning in 1937 demonstrated his effectiveness as a progressive political figure and one of the architects of the future of the Assamese people. After becoming the Premiership of the Province for the second time in 1946, he made an effort to realize his zeal for creating a new Assam. He had disclosed to his colleagues that he had only agreed to take on the role for a single term and that he would not be running in the subsequent election. His goal was to make Assam a progressive state, just like the rest of the union. Along with expanding roads, schools, colleges, and universities, he also sought to forge connections of brotherhood among the state's various tribes and towns. He had once told his friend the outgoing Governor, Sri Prakash, "I am a visionary. My heart always seeks to build and create something."¹ He wrote an article titled Assam Looks Ahead that demonstrates his appreciation of the Province's potential and the importance of improving its socio-economic situation. In spite of numerous obstacles during the pre and post-independence period, this great personality tirelessly toiled to realize his dream of modern Assam during his brief life. His name is indelibly etched in the political history of Assam as a freedom warrior, a follower of Gandhi, a statesman, a humanitarian, and most importantly, a native Assamese leader. Bordoloi led Assam's first government following independence as its first premier. This paper made an attempt to study Gopinath Bordoloi and his contribution towards Assam.

Social Issues and Gopinath Bordoloi:

Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi grew up during the Gandhian renaissance, when social services were at the forefront of public life. Responding to the Mahatma's call, he entered the liberation

movement and rose to become the adored leader of his people and the tallest public figure in eastern India.² After 1938, the Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry was confronted with the complex issue of encroachment on wastelands and reserved forests by immigrants from East Bengal. Bordoloi was aware of the growing immigration problem and the Muslim League's stated goal to incorporate Assam in their vision of Pakistan. Because of the urgency of the situation, he took some defensive measures. This complex subject sparked significant interest both inside and outside of the legislature. The problem began in 1918, when immigrants from overcrowded parts of Eastern Bengal began encroaching on sites designated for professional grazing reserves.³ They gradually spread to other areas of the valley, including the plains districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, and parts of North Lakhimpur. As a result of this inflow, the Muslim population in Assam increased dramatically between 1911 and 1941.

The Line System was implemented in 1920 to limit the settlement of immigrants in Assamese inhabited territories. The goal of this System was to separate immigrants from indigenous people by forcing them to dwell in specific areas beyond which they were not permitted to settle.⁴ The matter escalated when the immigrants threatened to occupy land in and near Assamese communities after occupying all vacant available areas. Several Muslim legislators demanded that the Line System be abolished, while Hindus defended it. The Congress Coalition Ministry of Gopinath Bordoloi barred the settlement of land to those who migrated from outside the province after 1 January 1938, based on the Line Enquiry Report issued by the Line System Enquiry Committee in 1937.⁵ Bordoloi established several tribal belts to preserve tribal territories against intrusion. Bordoloi also maintained a programme of maintaining grazing areas and reserved forests in order to preserve the province's important forest resources. Both Assamese and Bengali Muslim officials expressed strong support for the immigrants, hoping that the flood of immigrants would numerically boost the province's Muslim communal politics. On March 16, 1936, Nuruddin Ahmed introduced a motion in the Council seeking the elimination of the Line System, which he felt was impeding the integration of immigrants into Assamese society. Abdul Mazid Zioshshms, Abdul Khalique Choudhury, and others backed him. The resolution was defeated, however, by a vote of seven to twenty. All seven supporters were Muslims, while nearly all of the Council's Hindu members voted against the motions but the government did not participate in the poll.⁶

Another attempt to abolish the Line System was undertaken in 1937 by Muslim legislators in response to a resolution filed by Munwar Ali, a prominent Sylhet politician. Meanwhile, in Assam, a ministry led by Saadulla had taken office following a general election held in February 1937 under the Provincial Autonomy sanctioned by the Government of India Act, 1935. During 1939 - 1940, Saadulla's land settlement policy opened up 1 lakh bighas of land in Assam Valley for the settlement of Bengali Muslim immigrants, which proved very beneficial to these land hungry peasants who could hold up to 30 bighas of land or more for each homestead. After that when the Congress came to power following the general elections in 1946, it planned to expel immigrants from the professional grazing pastures. This spurred the Provincial Muslim League Committee, led by Bhasani, to protest the Congress's eviction policy.

The All-India Muslim League Legislator's Convention was held in Delhi in April 1946, and it demanded that Assam be included in Pakistan.⁷

The continual and overwhelming movement of people to Assam was the biggest and significant problem India had to tackle soon after independence. Not only was migration a concern in the immediate post-partition period, but so were other issues. Communal tensions also caused problems, such as when Hindus were attacked while commuting by train. All of these tensions stemmed from a decision on border demarcation. During that time, Gopinath Bordoloi played a critical role in resolving Assam's tensions. He regularly wrote letters to the center in order to get Assam some attention. Unfortunately, Bordoloi believed that the central government, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, was not even remotely sympathetic to Assam's border, as evidenced by his letter to Nehru on February 12, 1948, in which he stated, "Assam is today completely physically disconnected from India."⁸ It was often anticipated that Assam would remain a homeland only for Assamese-speaking people shortly after independence. But unfortunately, it had unintended consequences. One of them was the refugee crisis. The refugee problem immediately after partition and independence, the economic downturn, the influx from East Pakistan of landless, poverty-stricken Muslim peasants, the change in the demographic scenario and the accompanying rise of Assamese identity fears, to be followed by similar identity fears of the region's other small ethnic nationalities, the disintegration of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh, the growth of militant politics and the descent into secessionism the north eastern region becoming a thorny issue.⁹

The massive influx of refugees was followed by another issue, namely the rehabilitation of these refugees. It became the Assam government's responsibility to receive those refugees and rehabilitate them on its territory. In fact, the Government of India urged the Assam Government in 1949 to share half of the land it had kept for its landless people in order to rehabilitate East Bengal refugees.

Gopinath Bardoloi, who oversaw the education portfolio, was interested in all aspects of education. He prioritized the extension of primary education in the province as well as the education of underserved populations. Despite significant financial constraints, his proposals demonstrate a genuine desire to eliminate or at least reduce mass illiteracy in the province. A system for awarding special college scholarships to indigenous students has been established. Fifty percent of the budgeted money was set aside for tribal pupils, 20% for scheduled caste students, and 30% for other backward groups.¹⁰

Some of the main efforts done by the Bordoloi Ministry to expand education were as follows: A Mass Literacy drive was launched, and temporary supplementary workers were hired for the purpose, both on a divisional and sub-divisional basis. A number of Primary Schools in various Local Board districts got direct grants from Provincial Revenues. All of these institutions were integrated into the Board School system, and the grants were handed to the respective boards.¹¹ Prior to the creation of Bordoloi's Government, Secondary Education was only available in sub-divisional towns and a few significant rural centres. During his tenure, however, the grant-in-aid system was expanded to include more secondary schools in the state. The

Bordoloi Government's education policy from 1946 to 1950 resulted in a slow and steady expansion in the number of secondary schools as well as scholarship opportunities.

Bordoloi made considerable initiative to make the Gandhi-sponsored Basic Education Scheme, as designed by the Dr. Zakir Hussain Committee, a success in Assam. The Basic Education Scheme was more successful in Assam than in West Bengal, its adjacent state. The accomplishment was thanks to the efforts of a group of dedicated Wardha instructors who were hand-picked by Bordoloi himself.¹² Bordoloi had a long history with higher education before becoming the Premier of this State. Guwahati's B. Barooah College was founded in 1943. He worked tirelessly to find master's degree holders to start the college on the campus of Kamrup Academy H. S. School in Uzanbazar. Bordoloi chose to create this institution as a venture college for impoverished students of Guwahati with the support of a few notable social reformers such as Harikrishna Das, Lokabandhu Bhubaneswar Barooah, Durgeswar Sarma, Gaurikanta Talukdar, Keshab Kanta Barooah etc. Gopinath Bordoloi was also pioneer in the establishment of Gauhati University. Bordoloi was also influential in the establishment of medical technical colleges, in addition to the University. Bordoloi, who became Premier in 1946, promised in the inaugural session of the Legislative Assembly that he would do all possible to turn the Berry White Medical School in Dibrugarh into a full-fledged college.

The first Congress Ministry, led by Gopinath Bordoloi, undertook an audacious attempt to eradicate the opium problem by declaring blanket prohibition in the two sub-divisions of Dibrugarh and Sibsagar on April 15, 1939. As a first stage in the comprehensive prohibition policy, a significant number of camp clinics were established in rural areas of two Upper Assam districts for the treatment of addicts.¹³ During the second Bordoloi Ministry, the Opium Prohibition Bill was introduced in the Budget Session of 1947 and was subsequently passed. After obtaining the assent of the Governor General, the Assam Opium Prohibition Act 1947 came into force on 1 April, 1948.¹⁴

Economic issues and Gopinath Bordoloi:

Gopinath Bordoloi can be called the architect of modern Assam because of his immense contribution towards the socio-economic reconstruction of Assam during his tenure as Premier at a turbulent period of the history of the province. Colonial rule in Assam leading to the establishment of a modern economy based on capitalist principles because of the development of tea plantation saw mills, plywood and coal mining which led to the development of modern industrial sector.¹⁵

Agriculture, in which about 85 percent of the people were engaged, was more or less unaffected by the activities of the modern sector. The revenue especially the tax revenues in the provinces remained relatively static. Between 1921-1922 and 1936-37 provincial tax revenues actually fell by 8% while Central tax revenue went up by 18 %.¹⁶ The Congress Ministries assumed power during a time of widespread economic crisis and public pressure to lower rates of land revenue. These ministries were established in numerous provinces after 1937 and lasted until 1939. Bordoloi Ministry left in September 1939 and returned in February 1946, but the province's economic situation had not improved. The root of Assam's underdevelopment was

examined by Finance Minister B. Medhi in 1948 when presenting the budget. When the Congress Ministry of Bordoloi took office, the province's financial situation was in a terrible state. Prior to independence, Assam's economy experienced stagnation rather than growth. Bordoloi understood that the British occupation had destroyed the province's economy, politics, and culture.

After assuming the office in September 1938, Bordoloi took up measures to improve the Socio-economic condition of the people. Positive schemes were taken to eradicate opium eating by enforcing total prohibition of opium in two subdivisions of Dibrugarh and Sibsagar from 15 April, 1939. To reduce the burden of the poor farmers who formed more than 85% of the total population, the government decided on reduction of land revenue, restoration of lands confiscated by the Government for failure to pay revenue due to poverty, restriction of immigration into Assam and safeguarding the interest of the indigenous people.¹⁷ But the most important of the measures adopted by the ministry were the new taxation measures and the most important of the taxation measures was the Assam Agricultural Income Tax Bill.¹⁸

The reduction of land revenue to the extent of 50% on smaller holding and 20 to 30 % on larger holdings during 1938-39 was a great relief for the farmers because the province was affected by severe floods during the previous year. This also brought great relief to the poor peasants who were burdened with debts and were often compelled to sell their land to redeem these debts. But the Government would lose 53 lakhs of rupees because of the reduction of land revenue which had to be compensated by imposition of new taxes.¹⁹ In the Constituent Assembly during 1948–1949, Bordoloi outlined the financial situation of the Assam province and argued for a sizable percentage of the proceeds from Assam's natural resource sales as well as sufficient ongoing financial assistance. Bordoloi did emphasize the pressing need for funding to address the significant issues Assam is currently facing as a result of the separation. However, the miserable state of the country received little attention from the Central Government. Additionally, under the guise of a peasant revolution, Communists from Bengal instigated considerable unrest in the state, and the government was forced to spend a sizable sum of money to repel their aggression.

In February 1946, when the Congress assumed the office the Land Revenue Administration of the Province was in a chaotic condition. Due to the influx of persons from other parts of the country the province faced a large and steady increase in population. The influx of population also led to the growth of towns and villages and increase in crimes. The Grazing Reserves mostly in char areas were found encroached and occupied by the East Bengal immigrants to the detriment of the grazing and the indigenous people. As the food situation in India gradually begun to deteriorate, the Government tried to bring the waste land under cultivation. In addition of settlement of waste lands, an area of around 190000 bighas during 1946-48 and area of 90000 bighas 1950 had been settled with landless and flood effected people.²⁰

Following independence, the Bordoloi government also passed a number of laws to implement the agricultural sector's institutional changes. The Assam Land Requisition and

Acquisition Act of 1948, the Zamindari Abolition Act of 1951, and the Adhiars Protection and Regulations Act of 1948 were among them. On the other hand, the Bordoloi Government passed a resolution in the Legislative Assembly in 1938 for the establishment of an Industrial Board made up of the province's leading industrialists and economists, with the goal of developing a plan for launching new industries, particularly cottage industries with the aim of hiring the province's unemployed youth.

Gopinath Bordoloi's Role in Indian freedom Movement:

Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi was an idealistic leader. The story of his diverse life best showcases his unwavering commitment, rare spirit of sacrifice, rock-solid determination to oppose injustice in all its manifestations, empathy for others, and humanism in his manner.

The Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha and the Assam Association were two organizations that significantly improved the Assamese freedom struggle. The emerging Assamese middle class was represented by these two groups. In reality, the Assam Association offered a wide forum for all members of the educated middle class, including writers, solicitors, social workers, educators, and politicians.

When Gandhiji visited Guwahati in August 1921, Gopinath Bordoloi was an active member of the legal community there. He was aware of the political and social issues facing the nation because he was a member of the Assam Association. To the quartet of Tarun Ram Phookan, Naba Chandra Bordoloi, and Khuladher Chaliha, he was, however, playing second fiddle. The Non-Cooperation movement quickly gained ground in Assam as well. In 1921, Gopinath Bordoloi suspended his legal practice and took to organizational work and soon became the Joint Secretary of the Guwahati Congress Committee. After Phookan's arrest on 30 November, 1921, he became more active and visited villages to promote ideas of Khadi and Swadeshi.²¹

Gopinath Bordoloi was mentored by Tarun Ram Phookan. He was an outstanding leader with unique common sense and boldness, as well as other qualities of inventive leadership. Gopinath Bordoloi confesses later that Phookan's explanation of the concept of widespread civil disobedience was the first time he had ever learned it. Like his master, Gopinath Bordoloi gradually underwent initiation into Gandhianism.

Gopinath Bordoloi was a follower of the Gandhian principle of non-violence. Due to Bordoloi's unselfish dedication towards Assam the then Governor of Assam Jayram Das Doulatram conferred him with the title "Lokpriya" which means to be loved by all.²²

Although he did not achieve much success as a freedom fighter, between 1946 and 1947, he demonstrated his commitment to the national freedom movement. At this time, the majority of Bengali Muslim political leaders, many of whom belonged to the Muslim League, desired the incorporation of the predominantly Hindu Assam into East Pakistan.

Rabindranath Tagore, J C Bose, Surendranath Banerjee, and a few more writers had an influence on Bordoloi's freedom struggle. In Assam, he was a key figure in creating the Indian National Congress.

His understanding of the deep rooted problems of Assam earned him the respect of the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi- his political and spiritual mentor. Gandhi always stood by him and supported him.

Gopinath Bordoloi as a politician:

Gopinath Bordoloi was an eminent politician. Tarun Ram Phookan revived the Swaraj Party after Bordoloi resigned as head of the Guwahati District Congress Committee. Phookan was swiftly elected to the Central Legislature once more. He was ordered to resign from the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) in retaliation by the AICC. Both Phookan and Bordoloi not only complied with the directive but also went a step further by resigning from the primary membership of the Congress. Though Bordoloi did not participate in the 1930-33 movements. He however, never disassociated himself from the activities going on at the National and State levels. Evidently, he had some justification for keeping aloof from the Congress mainstream. He was actually a great believer in parliamentary politics and believed that unless some of them were in Assembly, the special problems of Assam could not be tackled.²³

He is the prime architect of modern polity of Assam. In 1936 the Congress decided to participate in the regional Assembly election. They won but decided to remain as the opposition party.²⁴

The Governor invited Gopinath Bordoloi to establish the government in 1938 after Md. Sadulla quit. Inauguration day was on 21st September. The new administration was only in place for a short time before leaving office in 1940.

Gopinath Bordoloi was appointed chief minister after the new constitution was established by the Congress. He served as Assam's first Chief Minister under a Congress government.

He significantly contributed to the Congress's ability to access the North East. The Assam Association was disbanded in 1921 as a result of partitions made by public figures, including Bordoloi. Bordoloi was chosen to serve as secretary of the newly formed Assam Provincial Committee in 1921. The entire Assamese populace was capable of escaping the Cabinet mission's scheme because to Bordoloi's fearlessness and capable leadership. Bordoloi saved the entire Northeast from the sinister design of "Crown colony".²⁵

Conclusion

The paper describes the relentless efforts of Bordoloi towards developing and modernizing Assam during his short tenure in office. Bordoloi tried his best for the development of the province inspite of its innumerable problems. Even after independence he played an important role in shaping the destiny of the people of Assam. Lack of proper communication facilities due to the partition of the country, trade problems with East Pakistan, attempts to grab Assam's land, problems of the tribal people, the lobby of Bengali Hindu refugees, problem of infiltrators, the misery treatment of the centre on economic matters and finally dictatorial and unfriendly behavior of Nehru and Patel all these had made Bordoloi totally depressed. During his

short tenure of life, both as a Congressman and as head of the provincial administration his vision and idealism in laying the foundation of a strong and progressive Assam.

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