

The Partition of Bengal by the British with sinister objectives: Opposition by the Press in Bengal and its impact on the Press in Assam (1905-20)

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Abstract:

The Partition of Bengal was implemented in 1905, much to the anger of the Indians, who knew it was a sinister attempt by the British to divide the Hindus and the Muslims. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of Bengal was apprehensive of the solidarity and growing political consciousness of the Bengalis. He formulated a plan under which a new province under the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam would be created where Muslims would be in a majority. For the people of Assam, the amalgamation of Assam with the districts of Bengal was certainly not a good prospect. Assam was under the direct control of the Governor General since 1874 and received liberal grants from the Government, which brought about great development to the province. This period also saw the recognition of Assamese as a second language in Calcutta Universities entrance examination and Assamese youths were appointed to Government offices. Therefore, it was only natural that Assam resented the move to tag the province to the much more advanced districts of Bengal. The paper tries to see the impact of the newspapers and journals in espousing the cause of nationalism in Assam, especially the newspapers from Bengal, who set the tone for opposing British domination over India.

Key Word: Partition of Bengal; Amrita Bazar Patrika; Bengalee; Assam Bilashini; Advocate of Assam; Asamiya.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 stimulated the minds of Indians to such an extent that the Bengal Press was full of praise for the victory of a tiny country like Japan, against a mighty European power. Bengal papers were effusive in their praise for Japan and wanted Indians to drive away the British from India. The papers which took a lead in instilling patriotism in Japan's miraculous achievement were the **Bengalee**, **Amrita Bazar Patrika** and the **Pioneer**. At a time when the rising sun of the East was casting its glow over India and shattered the myth of the might of the West, the British Government announced the Partition of Bengal. Nationalist leaders of the stature of Bal Gangadhar Tilok and Gopal Krishna Gokhale spoke eloquently about the Japanese victory and inspired Indians to stand unitedly against the British. When the news of the partition broke out, Bengal papers went all out against the British move and the Pioneer, in one of its editorials stated that

"..... the historic name of Assam will be obliterated forever, her language will suffer it will make her lose the amount of care and attention which it has at present received from the Government"

Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of Bengal, was apprehensive of the solidarity and growing political consciousness of the Bengalis and considered Bengal to be the hot-bed of political intrigues. Hence, as early as 1903, he envisaged a scheme for the Partition of Bengal, which was put into effect on October 16, 1905. Under the scheme, a new province under the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam, was to be created by amalgamating fourteen districts of Eastern Bengal and Assam, with Dacca as its capital. Besides dividing the Bengali population, Curzon also wanted to take advantage of the separatist tendencies among the Muslims of the province. As a consequence of the Partition, the Muslims, politically less advanced and more loyal to the British than the Hindus, would be in a majority in West Bengal, while the Bengalis would form a minority. Thus a thin wedge would be driven between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal.

Outrage of Bengal Press:

The people of Bengal felt humiliated and cheated by the British Government. Tensions mounted high and Surendranath Banerjee, addressing the Congress session of 1905, protested against the proposed Partition, and observed that, "*The Sun has risen in the East. Japan has (pledged) the Rising Sun, but that Sun of Asia will*

pass in its meridian course over this helpless land and shed upon us its brilliance and lustre. Throughout Bengal, the Partition provoked the toughest opposition that the British had ever encountered in a long time. The declaration of Partition on October 16, 1905 was observed as a day of national mourning all over Bengal. Along with resistance to Partition, the concept of Swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods was popularised. The **Hindoo Patriot**, wrote “Swadeshi was a determined effort to promote the industrial and commercial growth of the country, since it encourages the use of home-made goods and prohibits the import of foreign goods. As the significance of achieving a state of economic self-reliance dawned in the minds of the Indians, their determination added a new facet to the Indian national movement. The partition had inaugurated the Swadeshi Movement in India.

Alarmed at the rising trend of anti-British activities, particularly among the students, the Government resorted to repressive measures and stringent action was taken against educational institutions who did not prevent their students from participating in anti-Governmental agitations. Similar actions were taken in quick succession, the most notorious being the one that prohibited the singing of Bande Mataram during processions and the holding of political and quasi-political meetings.

The Press was not slow to pounce on such opportunities and regularly published news regarding the repressive Circulars issued by the Government. News about the strict action taken against teachers and educational institutions that did not adhere to Government Circulars was brought to the notice of the masses through the Press and as people read about the large number of students who had been jailed, fined and expelled from their institutions, their determination to oppose the foreign rulers was heightened. The fact that the maximum number of confiscations had been made in Bengal, is clear evidence of the Government’s grave concern about the aggressive nature of the anti-Partition Movement in Bengal and the newly constituted province of East Bengal and Assam. Several papers sympathising with nationalist activities were compelled to cease publication.

Undaunted by the restrictions imposed on the Press, a few papers from Bengal remained empathic in their anti-British tone. The **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, while questioning the propriety of the restrictions imposed on the liberty of the Press, observed that :

“The most astounding statement of Lord Curzon is in regard to the so-called liberty of the Indian Press. He simply out-cur zoned himself in saying that even the most advanced European democracies would be shocked at the freedom given to Indian publicists.

The imposition of the Indian Press Act of 1910 required every person keeping a printing press to provide a large security deposit, subject to forfeiture in case of publishing matter, considered to be seditious matter or inciting violence. Regardless of the enlightened public opinion, the Government remained adamant about its decision to curb the liberty of the Press in India. The Anti-British attitude of the Calcutta papers increased the Government’s determination to adopt special measures to protect the Press in Assam during this period from coming under the influence of the Bengal Press.

Papers in Bengal, such as the Jagaran, Banga-Bandhu, Kalyani and Tirhut Samachar, continued to lay a great deal of emphasis on Swadeshi and its merits. The Jagaran, in its issue of August 29, 1909, credited the promotion of Swadeshi, as being the chief factor in reducing the number of cases related to injustice and cruel treatment meted out to Indians by the Europeans masters. The Tirhut Samachar, while emphasizing on Swadeshi as a means of eradicating poverty, urged upon the educated Indians to remove the ignorance amongst those who still craved for foreign goods. Recalling India’s glorious past when she had occupied the foremost place in the world, and her rich civilization and wealth had attracted European merchants from distant lands, the paper lamented that she had now lost all her past glory and had fallen into absolute poverty. It suggested that the only remedy for such a situation lay in the use of indigenous goods which in turn would lead to an expansion of trade, thereby improving India’s financial condition. In addition to the boycott of foreign goods, there was also a clarion call given by Bipin Chandra Pal at Sylhet on August 16, 1906, asking students to boycott Government schools. In an instant response to this call, forty students decided to boycott their educational institutions and to cater to the needs of such students; the Sylhet National School was established. Maintained y voluntary contributions, the syllabus and examinations of the school was governed by the National Education Committee at Calcutta. Such institutions were centre from where the movement was spread amongst the masses, and were looked upon as a hot-bed of political intrigues by the Government. Singing patriotic songs from Bankim Chandra’s *Anandamath*, the teachers and students of the National Schools, openly participated in demonstrations and picketing of shops selling foreign goods.

Reaction of Press in Assam:

On the other hand, for the people of Assam, the amalgamation of Assam with the districts of Bengal came as a bolt from the blue. Assam had been separated from Bengal and made into a Chief Commissioner’s province under direct control of the Governor General in Council, in 1874. Assam received liberal grants from the Government, which brought about great development in communication and education in the province. This

period saw the recognition of Assamese as a second language in Calcutta University's Entrance Examination and Assamese youths were being appointed to Government offices. Therefore, it was only natural that the people of Assam resented the move to tag the province once again to the much more advanced districts of Bengal.

In Assam, Jagannath Barua, opposed the scheme and pointed out that under the new proposal Assam would receive very little attention of the Chief Commissioner and the people of Assam would have to face unequal competition from the highly educated and advantageously located districts of Bengal, for which Assam was not yet prepared. This view was also shared by the Assam Association, which felt that Assam would be neglected under the new scheme. The local Press expressed similar views and held views that the partition would have an adverse effect on the province. The **Advocate of Assam**, rightly pointed out that the new province would be a financial burden on the exhausted Indian exchequer, and stood firmly by other newspapers of the country which supported the spirit of Swadeshi, Swaraj, self-determination and nationalism. In fact, the paper can be considered as the pioneer in spreading nationalist ideas in Assam and was recognised as "... a powerful weapon of public opinion."

As the Government's determination to implement the new North Eastern Province became clear, P.N. Gohain Baruah appealed to the Assam Association and the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, through his paper **Assam Banti**, to fight against the issue of Assam's merger with Bengal in right earnest, and to create awareness among the people. In an editorial published in his newspaper on July 10, 1905 Gohain Baruah cautioned the people about the possibility of Assam's name being obliterated and appealed to the Government to retain the word 'Assam', while renaming the new province. As the Government remained firm in its decision, Jagannath Baruah and Manik Chandra Barua demanded that the new setup must have sufficient reservations for the rights of the Assamese people.

Welcoming the Swadeshi agitation, the Congress in its session of 1906, adapted the following Resolution:

"The Congress accords its most cordial support to the Swadeshi Movement and calls upon the people of the country to promote the growth of indigenous industries and to stimulate the production of indigenous articles by giving them preference over imported commodities even at a sacrifice."

As in Bengal, protest meetings, chanting of Bande Mataram, Rakhi-Bandhan, singing of national songs were organised in many parts of Assam on October 16, 1905. As the anti-Partition agitation spread, there was a spontaneous participation in the programme by both Hindus and Muslims of Gauhati, Dibrugarh, Goalpara, Silchar, Dhubri and other places.

The **Bengalee**, published under the editorship of Surendranath Banerjee, played a leading role in highlighting the full-fledged participation of Assam in the Swadeshi Movement. Surprisingly, in this regard, the papers of Assam were silent, and there was very little information in local papers about the anti-Partition agitation in Assam. Unfortunately the role of the Press in Assam was hardly commendable. News published by the newspapers in relation to the progress of the Swadeshi agitation was rare, and hence its impact in arousing national consciousness amongst the masses was minimal. No paper, besides the **Advocate of Assam**, contained any news related to Partition or Swadeshi agitation. Papers like **Assam Banti**, did comment on the advantages and disadvantages on the Partition Plan, but Swadeshi agitation in Assam hardly figured in its columns. Though **Usha**, a literary journal started in 1907, stated that the main aim of the Assamese Press should be to work for the development of Assamese literature, even this journal succumbed to the fear of Government action. Unable to digest the tone of a satirical piece entitled, **Anglo-Indian**, written by Kripa Bar Barua, published in the journal, the local Government compelled the editor to withdraw the article, terming it as provocative.

Surprisingly in an effort to prove his loyalty to the British Government, the editor not only apologised, but immediately published a poem entitled **Rajabhakti Asamor**, specially written in praise of the British. Amalendu Guha had observed in his book, that in 1906, Assam had only one newspaper, The **Advocate of Assam**. The silence observed by the Press in Assam regarding the participation of the people of the province in the Swadeshi Movement, encouraged papers from Bengal, like the **Amrit Bazar Patrika**, to comment in its issue of December 29, 1905, that there was no enthusiasm amongst the people of Assam to implement the Swadeshi Resolution and that "*so far as Assam is concerned, the Swadeshi Movement does not seem to have touched even the outer fringe of Manchester trade.*"

A correspondent of the **Bengalee**, who visited Assam to take stock of the situation, reported that the enthusiasm for promoting Swadeshi had resulted in a fall of the demand for foreign goods. The appeal made by the head priest of the Kamakhya temple to the pandas, the grocers and the sweet sellers, urging them to give up the purchase or sale of foreign items, was a striking example of the growing nationalism. At Tejpur and Barpeta, the students and local shopkeepers made an earnest attempt at promoting Swadeshi by generating public support for the use of indigenous articles.

In an effort to promote the cause of Swadeshi, the students at Gauhati decided to generate money by working for two days a week at the steamer ghats and railway stations. In addition to the boycott of foreign

goods, there was also a clarion call given by Bipin Chandra Pal, asking students to boycott Government schools. In an instant response to his call, forty students decided to boycott their educational institutions and to cater to the needs of such students; the Sylhet National School was established. Such institutions were centres from where the movement was spread amongst the masses, and were looked upon as a hot-bed of political intrigues by the Government. Political leaflets and pamphlets like **Swadeshi Bharat** and **Bande Mataram** were circulated amongst the students at Sibsagar, Jorhat, Nowgong, Mangaldai, Tezpur, Guwahati and Dhubri.

The publication of such news by the Bengal Press was due to the subservient role played by the Assamese Press, barring the **Advocate of Assam**. Such adverse reports, highly injurious to the prestige of every Assamese, who had been prepared to sacrifice all for the sake of the country, found no contradiction in the Press in Assam. Luckily for Assam, another paper from Bengal, the **Bengalee**, carried continuous and detailed reports about the efforts made to promote the cause of Swadeshi in Assam. The writings of Kripabar Bar Barua which inspired nationalist sentiments, created a suspicion in the minds of the local administration. Instances of warning issued to the local Press, for publishing provocative articles, point to the fact that Assam had taken keen interest in the Swadeshi agitation.

Meanwhile, the repressive measures continued in the wake of the Swadeshi Movement. The hand of repression fell more severely in the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, where the Government was also resorting to the policy of Divide and Rule. The Partition had succeeded in widening the rift between the Moderates and the Extremists. The firm faith reposed by the latter on the boycott of foreign goods and the demand for Swaraj, provoked a section of youths in Assam and Bengal to seek the salvation of the country by adopting terrorist methods.

The **Seva Sangha**, a revolutionary organisation founded by Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, established contact with the revolutionaries of Bengal. The Press in Assam was not in favour of the use of extremist methods and condemned violent activities. The concept of using terrorist methods did not find favour with the intelligentsia of Assam. Opposing the revolutionary methods, the **Assam Banti**, believed that, "*We should drive out all persons coming from other provinces to disseminate sedition among the people of Assam. Our people should refrain from subscribing papers which are permeated with seditious sentiments.*" In a similar tone, the **Times of Assam** wrote that, "*The votaries of Swadeshi and Swaraj can never expect the people to follow their lead so long as their programme is bloodshed, violence and disorder.*"

Comments published in the Assamese papers, indicate the passive stance of nationalism, where even its intelligentsia abhorred violence. Thus the people of Assam, who were avid readers of papers from Bengal were supportive of revolutionary methods as a means of achieving Swaraj. The British on the other hand felt that repression alone could not restore peace and that steps should be taken to win the support of the Muslims. The proposed **Morley-Minto Reforms** of 1909, aimed at wooing the Muslims and provided not only for separate electorates, but also for additional seats in the Councils for Muslims.

Since the Morley-Minto Reforms failed to satisfy the Indians, the British were forced to admit that the problem of extremism could not be resolved. Hence, at the **Delhi Durbar** held on December 12, 1911 a Royal Declaration was made annulling the Partition of 1906, as a result of which Assam was formally reverted to its old status as a Chief Commissioner's Province with effect from April, 1912.

Unfortunately, no Press from Assam was invited to the Durbar and commenting on the choice of invitees from Assam, **Assam Banti** stated that, "*no judiciousness has been exercised in the matter of selection. That the Assamese Press can boast of men who will represent the interests of Assam more worthily than most of those invited to the Durbar is a fact that will be recognised later by the authorities.*" The article was a reflection of the attitude of the British towards the Assamese Press, which it did not hold in high esteem.

Amongst the most important papers in circulation following the annulment of the Partition of Bengal was the **Assam Bilashini**, which reappeared in 1913. The paper shed its earlier pro-British attitude and highlighted the Home Rule Movement, initiated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The **Asamiya**, started on August 25, 1918, was considered to be the mouthpiece of the people. Its motto being the welfare of the masses, the paper kept itself abreast with the measures adopted by the Government. In an article entitled 'Sankalpa' the editor reiterated that his Motherland was dearer to him than Heaven. Both the **Assam Bilashini** and **Asamiya** were destined to play an important role in the freedom movement. They lent whole-hearted support to Mahatma Gandhi in his crusade against the British imperialism, which began with the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. The Government's attitude towards the Press in Assam, till this point of time was lenient as was evident from the statement of the Provincial Government which reported that, "*..... with an exception here and there, the tone of the Press was unobjectionable.*" It seems that the journals and papers were very keen not to publish anything objectionable, probably the Assamese intelligentsia turned its attention to the more articulate field of language and literature, which would serve Assam better.

II. CONCLUSION

Till 1920, the Press in Assam, was moderate in its approach to the policies of the British Government, the latter did not appear to be overtly concerned about the impact of the press on the people. Even papers like the *Advocate of Assam* and the *Assam Banti*, which criticized the Partition of Bengal, were careful not to annoy the Government to the extent of drawing its wrath upon themselves. The *Assam Bilashini* and the *Asamia*, of a later period, did lend support to the Home Rule Movement through its writings, but even such writings appeared to be mere references to the issue concerned. Krishnakanta Bhattacharjee, the editor of the *Assam Bilashini* was a Government servant and was compelled to operate under severe pressure. Some attempts were made by journals such as the *Asom Pradipika*, *Milan*, and *Chetona*, to keep Assam's interest alive in the Swadeshi agitation by publishing articles on the lives of the national leaders, while simultaneously espousing the cause of local issues of the state. It was mainly the national papers like the *Kesari*, *Young India*, *Weekly Chronicle*, *Bombay Chronicle* and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, which had to bear the brunt of the rigorous Press laws for fearless criticism of British policies, which provided the necessary inspiration for the growth of nationalism in the state and encouraged the Assamese people to fight side by side with their brethren in other parts of the country to free the country from foreign yoke.

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