



# Thinking through the Grouping Plan: The role of Gopinath Bordoloi in the Grouping crisis of Assam

Dr. Amiya Kumar Das

*Associate Professor, Department of History, D.K.D College, Dergaon, Golaghat (Assam)-785614*

**Abstract:** *In the wake of political ups and down after the close of the Second World War; there arose two distinct political conjecture. In the three previous years the conditions in India following the Quit India movement and the aftermath of the INA trial vastly altered the political scenario in India. The assumption of power by Labour Party in the 10 Downing Street, at the end first parliamentary poll in Britain after Second World War, the new Prime minister, Mr. Attlee, in a statement in the House of Commons said that a proposal was underway to solve the issue of Indian Independence. Secondly, Wavell announced to hold general election in September 19, 1945 in India. As there was no direct signal on independence issue, the Congress Working Committee was not happy on the announcement of the Viceroy but they purposefully prepared for the election to achieve the goal of independence. In Assam INC, Muslim League, Zamiyat –Ul- Ulema, Ahom Association, Hindu-Mahasabha, CPI and Tribal League had preparing for upcoming general election for the province of Assam.*

*The Atlee Government send a Cabinet Mission to India for negotiations with the Indian leaders for transfer of power. In setting out the structure of the Grouping part of Cabinet Mission plan, the Mission explained that there would be three Groups: Group C consisting of Assam and Bengal. This mischievous plan design that it would place Assam at the mercy of the Muslim majority Bengal for all time to come. So, it was an uphill task for the Assamese people how to tackle the situation.*

**Key words:** *CWC, Cabinet Mission, Line System, Grouping Plan, East Bengal.*

## INTRODUCTION

The most striking thing about modern India is that the men and women who made history also wrote authoritatively.<sup>1</sup> In the formative years of Congress, they used to exercise their activities, first of all, they were initially learners, then teachers. But in succeeding years the country's leading politicians were become its leading political thinkers. Gopinath Bordoloi (GNB), the modern architect of Assam had devoted his full energy against the Grouping Plan. Assam had produced so many politicians, though unusual having, but they were become original political thinkers of Assam. GNB was also belonging to the same.

## OBJECTIVE:

The paper seeks to explore how the legend nurtured space and defined the new meaning of Assam in that crisis period and secondly, the paper seeks to explore how GNB thinking through the regional aspirations against the current of Great Nationalism and Grouping Plan.

## METHOD AND MATERIALS

The paper basically on secondary sources however based on historical studies. The information has been collected from different books, journal, newspapers and other historical reports.

## DISCUSSION:

After the demise of Chandra Nath Sarma (1922), Nabin Ch. Bordoloi (1936) and Torun Ram Phukan (1939) only GNB, Faiznur Ali and Ambikagiri Roychoudhary remained constantly connections with Assamese peculiar situations, without losing sight of the national interest. However, among the above mentioned six Assamese Congressmen, GNB was unique in his profound understanding of Gandhism. Once GNB said that Gandhis call for N.C Movement against the British injustice in 1920 without violence but with 'a purified soul' and 'strength of truth' made a tremendous impact on his political life. It was when Gandhi went to Assam in 1921 that Bordoloi took him as his spiritual and political mentor. GNB began his political life as one of the first batch of Congress leaders in Assam in 1920, i.e. before the Provincial Congress organizations established there in 1921.

Keeping in view the problem of Assam, GNB started taking interest in local self-government since 1924 to 1938. This engagement went hand in hand with the Swarajist principles and the Gandhian constructive programme. He attended the Lahore



Session of Congress in 1929, with a heavy heart because of the Council Boycott. Unlike T.R. Phukan and Rohini Kr. Choudhary, he did not cut the relations with Congress.

#### THE SHADOW OF LINE SYSTEM IN ASSAM:

The East Bengali peasant's presence in the province of Assam had been categorically opposed from cross section of Assamese peasantry. They also equally vocal to criticize the role of bureaucrats in revenue and forest departments, European tea Planters, Nepali Grazers and Assamese politician.<sup>2</sup>The continuous pressure from tea planters' lobby succeeded in disallowing the conversions of floodplains of eastern Assam in to a jute- producing area. There had been an implicit competition to champion the cause of Wasteland either by the Assamese peasants or by East Bengali peasants. Already, even before the land colonization scheme began in 1928, revenue officials had noted the increasing pressure of East Bengali Peasants for gaining land in the high – lying areas, compared to their initial preference for low-lying areas. Faced with increasing pressure to restrict migration of different interest groups, the Assam administration was forced to redefine its land settlement policy. In 1919, the Assam administration as a measure to contain this resentment among the Assamese peasantry, decided to restrict the settlement of East Bengali peasants in lands previously held by Assamese peasants or those in high lands. To make such restriction a law, the administration began to issue, both to Assamese and immigrant peasants, land under annual lease, would mean transfer to East Bengali settlers for perpetuity. Such annual *patta* lands could not be sold and did not entail any right of transfer either. Assamese landlords vehemently opposed it. This type of legal action did not help in containing peasants' resentments against immigration. To resolve the tricky situation, the Assam administration, strongly backed by provincial politics, evolved a mechanism to regulate the settlement of immigrants in 1920. This mechanism, known as Line System was aimed at ensuring spatial separation of Assamese peasants from the East Bengali peasant.

Though the Line System was introduced to restrict the movement of East Bengali peasants in to the Assamese village and their field, such restrictions could be hardly implemented. Gradually, the East Bengali peasants took the policy of mass raid in the government reserve and even some places of *Satra*. The gradual flow of these immigration made the way out for agricultural capital. In the course of time, the Assamese peasants especially from tribal infested area made thousands complain against such encroachments. The grazer reserves were probably too large for the requirement of Assamese peasants and grazer and could be throwing open to cultivation by East Bengali peasants. To effectively control any kind of mounting pressure for Assamese peasants, the government took care to keep a limited number of these reserves beyond the scope of settlement, but there was more trouble to come. In the first session of Assembly in 1937 a discussion was held on the practicability of Line system and the government had continued to receive reports and rumors which one kind of a belief that growing stronger in popular minds that the Line system was about to be abolished and encroachment upon the government land would be a more common. Dr. Amalendu Guha, ironically said that under the shadow of a Bengali-Assamese conflict, the growth of nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam was a two-track process. People were increasingly turning as much to pan Indian nationalism at the all-India level as little nationalism as the linguistic–regional level. The aspirations of regionalism had been a cause of many concerns which echoed even largely in the Grouping plan.

In the later part of 1939, GNB adopted a resolution on the question of land settlement which continued to have a long term implications for the regional polity. The government decided to deny permission for settlement in grazing reserves and declared that it would regulate the land settlement of landless peasants on available wasteland. It also decided to evict all immigrants settlers, from areas declared as 'protected tribal block' in submontane areas. But the resignation of GNB led Congress ministry in November, 1938 meant that the policy could not be executed. There had been a constant clash and argument between APCC and Assam Provincial Muslim League on the Line System. Assam Provincial Muslim League demanded a complete rejection of the Line System. As the land settlement dynamics began to unfold, in July 1942 The Bengal Legislative Council demanded that the Indian government bring an end to all the hurdles that had stood in the way of immigration to Assam.

Consequent upon, in August 1943 the Assam Provincial Muslim League government in Assam adopted another policy of distribution of land among the landless peasants under the scheme of 'Grow more Food'. Envisaged as a part of a larger national programme, this scheme made room for de-reserving grazing reserves in the western Assam so as to distribute land among different communities. From 1943 to 1944, as estimated 34,000 acres of grazing reserves were distributed among the East – Bengali as well as Assamese landed peasants.

Though the Congress and Muslim League were clearly divided on the issue. Muslim League maintained that there had been no discrimination against the Assamese peasants as regards land settlement. Saadulla, once admitted that of the total land distributed in the year 1941-42 only 13% were settled with the Eastern Bengali peasants. In 1945, Muslim League government adopted two land settlement resolution after three party conference arrived at a consensus. It undertook wasteland in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgaon landless peasants of all categories including the pre-1938 immigration. After resume the power by Congress in February 1946, the government undertook to re-examine the discrepancies of Assam Land Revenue Manual so



that the interest of local peasants as also the pre-1938 immigrants could be protected. Therefore, the imposition of Line System was an obvious choice of British which gradually became a field for the best practices of communalism in Assam.

#### INDIAN SITUATION:

The British government hoped that all parties and communities in India would co-operate in India's war effort and by thus working together pave the way for India's attainment of free and equal partnership in British Commonwealth of Nations.

However, nothing came out of the August Offer on account of the attitude of Congress. The offer was simply rejected. Again, Cripps Mission did not perpetuate the aspirations of the Indians. According to National Herald the Cripps Mission was the result of American pressure. It was a stage-managed show to buy off the world opinion and to impose a preconceived failure on the people of India.<sup>4</sup> The Cripps Mission was a failure as the Congress refused to accept the short term arrangement in the country. The Congress leaders got convinced that they could not expect anything from the British government in the near future. It was under these circumstances that the Congress passed the famous Quit India resolutions on August 8, 1942. In March 1944, Rajagopalchari put forward his formula to resolve the political deadlock in India. However, his proposals were not accepted by Mr. Zinnah. In January 1945, the Desai-Liaquat formula saw the light of the day, but nothing came of it. On June 14, 1945, Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India, gave a broadcast to the people of India. After that, he called a conference of the Indian leaders to end the deadlock. His proposals were not accepted and he made public confession on his failure. When Attlee came to power in 1945, he ordered the holding of election in India. He also sent the famous Cabinet Mission to India in March 1946. Prolonged discussions took place between the members of the Mission and leaders of Congress and Muslim League. However, the main two parties could not come to any mutual understanding. The result was that the members of the Mission had put forward their own formula for solving the constitutional deadlock. This formula was embodied in a joint statement issued by the Cabinet Mission and Viceroy on May 16, 1946, that the new constitution of India should be the following basic form-

1. There should be a union of India, embracing both British India and states which should deal with the following subjects: Foreign Affairs, Defense and Communications, and should have the powers necessary to raise the finance required for the above subjects.
2. The Union should have an executive and legislature constituted from India and British representatives. Any question raising a major communal issue in the legislature should require for its decision a majority of the representatives present and voting of each of the two major communities as well as majority of all the members present and voting.
3. All subjects other than the Union subjects and all residuary powers should vest in the Province.
4. The states will retain all subjects and powers other than those ceded to Union.
5. The Provinces should be free to form Groups with Executives and Legislatures, and each Group could determine the Provincial subjects to be taken common.
6. The Constitution of the Union and of the Groups should contain a provision whereby any Province could by a majority vote of its Legislative Assembly, call for a consideration of the terms of the constitution after an initial period of 10 years and 10 yearly intervals thereafter.

As regards the constitution-making machinery, it was provided that the Legislative Assemblies of the provinces would elect the members of that body on the basis of one representative for one million of the population. The Sikh and Muslim legislators were to elect the Quota of their communities, determined on the population basis. Others were to elect the representative for the rest of the population basis. Others were to elect the representatives from the provinces were to divide themselves into three sections, A, B and C sections. Section C was to consist of the representatives of Bengal and Assam, Section B of the Punjab, Sindh and North West Frontier Zone and British Baluchistan, and Section A of the rest of India.

On 16<sup>th</sup> May, in the very day of announcing Cabinet Plan in New Delhi, APCC was in Plenary Session at Guwahati. However, the news came too late to be put on the day's agenda and so the newly re-elected President Md. Tayyebulla, convened an emergency meeting of his working Committee that evening. The news had echoed as a general discontentment and apprehension and this was reflected in the next day's telegram from secretary of APCC to the CWC in session in Delhi. GNB premier of Assam who was in Delhi at the time of announcing the Cabinet Mission Plan. He immediately submitted a memorandum before the CWC which was discussing the Cabinet Mission proposals. Excepting one member of CWC, S.C. Bose none among the other members listens to GNB plea. Throughout the forties GNB he had been warning his colleagues in Assam Congress in vain of the possibility of Assam being included in a future state of Pakistan and he had, even against the oppositions of the Organizational Congress in Assam, tried to take measures to guard against this danger. Recently he had been highly apprehensive of some secret British plans for amalgamating Assam with Bengal and of carving out a new state from the excluded areas and partially excluded areas around the Brahmaputra Valley by separating them from Assam. In that complex political situation GNB was absolutely the fittest person to intervene on Assam behalf.



On the British side Wavell was clear cut in his dealings with the Indian leader. Some of the Cabinet delegates however, very cautious not annoy the Congress or the Muslim League leaders; they even did not speak the whole truth while explaining their motive regarding some controversial clauses or related documents. On the Indian side, Azad, the congress President at the time of birth of the plan, found it excellent with all its 'Sections' and 'Grouping' devices, and more or less akin to the conception he had himself had, to solve once and for all the genuine communal problem of the Muslim community in India, <sup>6</sup>And, yet he publicly gave support to the Congressmen of Assam who opposed these very devices. Nehru, who succeeded Azad as the Congress President would have like to have accepted the Plan without a firm commitment in order to change it from within according to the wishes of the Constituent Assembly, which contrary to the perception of Cabinet Mission, he considered sovereign. Like Gandhi, Nehru welcomes the plan since it embodied the serious intension of the British to quit India and appreciated the need for a close involvement in the process of transfer of power. Nehru had pave the way utmost cleverly for the grand success, but his ultimate success depended on two prerequisites: first, Congress must remain an undivided house so that he and CWC could claim to speak for the Congress of all the provinces, second, the Muslim League must always be kept involved to keep the process on the transfer of power going. So far the provincial leaders throughout the freedom struggle acquired the habit of looking submissively to the central leaders for direction, no rebellion from any provincial Congress was expected by Nehru and CWC.

The fact that the CWC never presented Assam's Grouping problem as their main point of discontent with the Cabinet Mission Plan, although it was really so, helped their negotiations with the British to continue uninterrupted. However, after the ultimatum given by British Government on 6 December, Nehru and his working committee had to choose between Assam and the Cabinet Mission Plan, and they choose the plan. After this, there were some inconsistent and confusing statement from Nehru which eventually led the Congress to ponder *satyagraha* against the Congress itself with Gandhi's blessings. As a result, the Cabinet Mission Plan failed. The apprehensions of Assamese Congressmen increased day by day. They thought that since their Hindu majority province would be bound together with the bigger Muslim majority province of Bengal within one section, the acceptance of the section would automatically mean opting for the group, since the majority in the section would be able to decide Assam's constitution and vote for having a group constitution. Thus Assam would be submerged in Bengal. In fact, the grouping provisions was especially made as an essential feature of the Plan to satisfy the Muslim League. Instead of conceding 'Pakistan' as such, a half-way house was created by grouping provinces in such a way that at least two Muslim-dominated areas would emerge, representing the 'Muslim Nation'. That is why All India Muslim League accepted the Plan on 6 June, 1946, declaring that the 'basis and the foundation of Pakistan are inherent in the Mission's Plan by virtue of the compulsory grouping.' According to Nirode Kr. Barooah that Assam was not just within the Leagues map of Pakistan; it has been always been in the British map of Pakistan as well. And British tried their best to achieve these objective before and after the Cabinet Mission Plan.

For GNB, it was most detestably undemocratic that Assam should be grouped with another province against their will. In a Memorandum to CWC, 19 May, GNB was very forceful and called the Cabinet Mission's provision of grouping a 'Sinister Proposal'. He warned the Congress high command against acceptance of this: "Assam...will not be taken lightly and it will not be a surprise if many in Assam will consider it to be great betrayal". GNB particularly gave importance to mobilizing the people for mass movement against grouping. 'Anti-Grouping day' was observed on June 15, and hundreds of meetings and processions were held not only in major towns of Brahmaputra Valley but also in the interior areas of the Province. This first phase of mass protest and agitation continued until July.

On June 8, according to Tayyebulla, Nehru also suggested that the Assam Legislative Assembly should pass a resolution refusing to go to the section. The next day Sardar B. Patel reassured them of the support of the Central Congress to Assam and he, too, suggested that a resolution should be passed in the Legislative Assembly against Assam's joining the Group. Azad, Congress President, told the Assam leaders that the Congress would continue to oppose grouping. Of all the central leaders that Assam delegates met, Gandhiji (9 June) alone seems to have understood the agony of Assam leaders. He said that the British interpretations of Plan was supporting Jinnah's interest and that was the source of all problems. Before that at Patna, Rajendra Prasad, although sympathized with Assam leaders was not sure whether he would be able to influence the CWC. Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister on the other hand, was positively angry with Assam's stand and considered it against the interest of the nations.

It was GNB's great credit that he obtained support for the resolution from Surma Valley Congressmen as well as from the Hill tribes Representative. GNB's motion created the desired effect on the League and the British but Nehru, who had in the meantime become the Congress President, was not happy with the

Resolutions passed by the Assam's legislative Assembly. He thought that GNB had mixed up 'Section' with 'Grouping'. Quite clearly after series of exchanges of opinion between GNB and Nehru, the later wanted the former to accept the risk of joining the section whereby at worst Assam, 'if she was strong enough,' would be in a group for a short time, i.e. until the next general election. GNB did not rely on Nehru's conviction and assurance that finally no grouping would take place and rushed to his mandatory resolution. GNB was not alone in not believing that Nehru or Congress could change everything once they were in



the Constituent Assembly. Even Azad considered Nehru to be wrong in his line of thought. Meanwhile, Jinnah vehemently opposed the Assam Assembly's directive to their representatives and reverted to his Pakistan stand.

Nehru either deliberately ignored Assam's fear about section or he never cared to understand the problem. His statements and utterances became more and more confusing and disheartening to Assam Congress leaders. However, on 19 November, Wavell, for the first time told Nehru and Jinnah privately something which, although meaning very little in practice, at least focused on Assam's fears. He told Nehru that 'Congress could not make a constitution for India without the Muslims; any more than section C could make constitution for Assam without the agreement of the people of Assam.' Similarly, he told that on the same day that the Muslim League could not force a constitution on Assam or any other Province in section B or C without their consent. This change in Wavell's position about Section seems to be consequent upon Assam's strong opposition which the Secretary of State also did not think was 'wholly unfounded'. Nehru, too, at this time seems to have realized at least that the real problem of Assam was the section in the first place, and the grouping came only afterwards. Nehru said that it would be quite wrong for Bengal to settle the constitution of Assam. But his Majesty's government in London categorically opposed the Assam's stands and said that the picture will be cleared after the general elections. GNB and his colleagues from Assam informed Nehru that, in view of the latest interpretations of HMG, the Assam Congress members of the Constituent Assembly had no other option but to refuse to go in to the section in accordance with the mandates of Assembly. However, it is to be mentioned that all through the 1940s, GNB had warned against the possibility of Assam going to Pakistan and often in the teeth of opposition from the Assam Congress itself, had taken counter measures against it. He was aware of the fact that since the Congress was a monolithic organization, there would be no second line of defense for Assam under the Congress umbrella once the High Command decided to withdraw their support to Assam in favor of the so called larger interests of India. According to GNB, the only way open to Assam was to revolt against the Congress itself. For the first time since 1939, the organizational wing of Congress of Assam seemed to have fully concurred with GNB's line of policy and accepted his initiative and leadership. Like other previous important political decisions, GNB wanted to consult Gandhi. When GNB's emissaries met Gandhi, he said, "Lodge its protest and retire from the constituent Assembly. It will be a kind of Satyagraha against the Congress for the good of the Congress." Gandhi's stand on Assam seems to have put a brake on Nehru. Later, Nehru, J.B. Kripanali and Sankar Rao Deo decided to meet Gandhi personally on the question of Assam. Gandhi's opinion was same as he had talked to Patel: 'But rest assured that I am right on that point.' Nehru and CWC now feared that Assam Congress might secede from the Central Congress on the issue of Constituent Assembly. Even CWC member Kripanali openly showed his dislike to the Assam Congress leader GNB and Sidhinath Sarma. Sudhir Ghose, an associate of Gandhiji described in his book 'Gandhi's Emissary', 'GNB the eminent Congressmen from Assam, shed tears before Gandhiji on behalf of the people of Assam'. A man of foresight, GNB did not lose heart and evolved a threefold strategy to frustrate the Grouping design. He and the Assam Provincial Congress Committee roused the people of Assam to launch a united movement against the scheme. The Congress-Socialist and Communists also played a significant role in spearheading the open anti-grouping agitation that seized the people. The Assam Provincial organizing committee of CPI called the AICC resolution a death-blow to Assam's birthright to decide her own constitution, and her relations with Bengal and other Province. As a premier, he called a session of the Assam Assembly to elect Assam's representatives to the Constituent Assembly in terms of the Cabinet Mission Plan and at the same time to pass a resolution asking the Assam members of the Constituent Assembly not to sit in the Legislature of Section C. Alongside this, he once again decided to seek Gandhiji's help to save Assam in the crisis posed by the British despite its acceptance by the Congress and Muslim League. The Resolution directed the Assam representatives that "they shall take part in the meetings Constituent Assembly for the purpose of framing the Union Constitution and all matters relating to Union Constitution." It was the hegemonic nature of CWC and adamancy of Nehru pushed the Assam's situation more critical, devoid of the aspirations of Assamese people altogether.

Meanwhile, there was a change in the Viceroyalty with Lord Mountbatten replacing Lord Wavell in March 1947. The new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, resumed negotiations with the Indian leaders on the basis of the British Cabinet Mission Plan was already hanging by a thread due to objection from Assam that led to the rethinking of the Congress leaders. When grouping part of the Mission's plan was virtually dead, the Muslim league leader withdrawn his support. All this led to the burial of the British Plan of May 16, 1946, and Lord Mountbatten with the approval of Atlee, British Government proposed the partition scheme and it became reality on August 15, 1947 when India and Pakistan became two independent nations.

The recurring of the political problems faced by the Assamese people throughout the colonial period and after from East Bengal, now Bangladesh had a great imprint, a phobia to the people of Assam. The regionalism had a constant clash with States policies. But GNB unequivocally protest such type of dominating attitude of national leaders. It was his masterstrokes of his policies that Assam was saved from communal agenda of British and their associate Muslim League. He and his fellow Congressmen categorically tried to give Assam a new identity and the dream come to true once for all.



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