

## Role Of Muslims In The Khilafat And Non-Cooperation Movement In Assam

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### ABSTRACT

The movement which built up in the early 1920s over the issue of spiritual and temporal authority of the Khilafat as well as the territorial integrity of the Turkish Empire also touched Assam. Both the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam reacted instinctively to the cause of the Khilafatists and claimed for the restoration of status quo of the Ottoman ruler. In this paper we will try to explore the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement in both the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley, more specifically in the Surma Valley where the maximum of Assam Muslims lived. It will also be tried to highlight the role of the Assam Muslims in the movement and their stands over the Khilafat issue.

Key Words: Assam, Muslims, Khilafat, Non-Cooperation, Swadeshi, Boycott.

### Introduction

The dissatisfaction that was created over the Act of 1919 was further increased by the infamous Rowlatt Act, Punjab atrocities and the Khilafat wrongs.<sup>1</sup> Getting the news of the dismemberment of Turkish Empire, the Indian Muslims got offended and it created an anti-British feeling in India among them. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) tried to make use of this anti-British feeling in the non-

violent Non-cooperation Movement.<sup>2</sup> He knew well that to begin any powerful political agitation in India it was required to have a friendly relation between the Hindus and the Muslims and the Khilafat issue gave Gandhi that opportunity and he wanted to utilize it.<sup>3</sup> The involvement of Mahatma Gandhi in the movement not only provided a momentum but made it an all-India movement also.

If we go through a writing of Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India* on 20 October, 1921 it seemed that he wanted to spiritualize the whole Khilafat issue from both the Hindu and Muslim point of view as he mentions:

“I claim that with us both the Khilafat is the central fact, with Maulana Muhammad Ali because it is his religion, with me because, in laying down my life for the Khilafat, I ensure the safety of the cow, that is my religion, from the Mussalman knife.”<sup>4</sup>

The Manifesto of Gandhi came on March 10, 1920 representing his thoughts on the future strategies suggesting Non-cooperation as the only way to be followed by the Khilafatists if their demands were not fulfilled. The Khilafat Conference held at Madras on 17 April 1920 and accepted Gandhi’s ideas. It also came with plan of action for the progressive execution of the Non-cooperation program like (a) rejection of honorary posts, titles and membership of councils, (b) resignation from posts under Government, (c) giving up of appointments in the police and military forces, and (d) refusal to pay taxes.<sup>5</sup>

The Treaty of Sevres was published on 14 May 1920. It created “righteous” resentment all over the world amongst Muslims including Indian Muslims as it deprived the Khalifa of all his territories in Europe and Asia. The Holy places of Islam were made over to the Non-Muslim hands. Indian Muslims started feeling uneasy about Turkey’s fate which led to the starting of a vigorous movement in India in support of the Khalifa.<sup>6</sup> So, the time for non-cooperation with the British had come as the demands of the Indian deputation were denied and the Treaty of Sevres snatched everything from the Turkish Sultan. Under the direction of Gandhi,

the Central Khilafat Committee organized a general all-India hartal. August 1, 1920 was observed as the Khilafat Day and also marked the beginning of Non-cooperation Movement. Hartals, prayer-meetings, renunciation of titles and honorary posts were reported from various places on that day.<sup>7</sup> The Congress organized a special session at Calcutta in September 1920 and passed Gandhi's non-violent Non-cooperation resolution in spite of stiff resistance from leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932), Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1875-1948) and others. It was also endorsed by the annual session of the Congress held at Nagpur.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Non-Co-operation and Khilafat Movement in Assam:**

The effect of the movement could also be seen in Assam. There was an enthusiastic response to the call of the Khilafatists. Resolutions were adopted throughout Assam demanding the immediate return of the Turkish Sultan to his previous position.

Returning from Nagpur, the leaders addressed people in the different parts of Assam during the early months of 1921. The main issues on which they emphasized were centered round the propagation of swadeshi, Khilafat and the exposure of the colonial misrule.<sup>9</sup> T. R. Phookan (1877-1939) addressed gatherings at Maroa (Kamrup) on 26 February and at Hajo on 27 February 1921 on British betrayal and mistreatment towards Turkish ruler. A gathering was also organized at Gauhati on 24 February under the presidency of Mohammad Tayyebulla (1894-1967). A number of sweepers, cobblers, washer men, carters and laborers participated the gathering and took an oath to avoid liquor.<sup>10</sup>

However, before these gatherings, the impact of the Khilafat demonstration had already reached Assam and it was through the Central Khilafat Committee on 19 March 1920.<sup>11</sup> The day was observed as a day of national mourning in Assam also. In the Surma Valley the day was observed with hartals and meetings. The Muslims of Karimganj in a public meeting warned the government to start jihad, if the Khilafat dispute was not resolved satisfactorily. The 19<sup>th</sup> March was also observed and held public meetings and

hartals in Gauhati, Goalpara, Jorhat, Sibsagar and North Lakhimpur.<sup>12</sup>

Getting invitation from Assam, Mahatma Gandhi arrived at Gauhati on 18 August 1921 with eleven people including Muhammad Ali (1878-1931) and Shaukat Ali (1873-1938). The visit of Mahatma Gandhi gave an extra edge to the movement that “was already gathering momentum in both the valleys of Assam”. Gandhi spoke in a number of meetings at Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet. The speeches of Gandhi delivered at different corners of Assam attracted thousands of people even from the remote areas. In these places foreign cloths were burnt in a demonstrative manner which had a great impact on the sellers of foreign goods.<sup>13</sup> Gandhi reached Silchar along with his party on 27 August 1921.<sup>14</sup> The Khilafat workers arranged a large procession with Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali. The procession crossed all the important roads of Silchar. After the procession, both Gandhi and Muhammad Ali delivered lectures in a public meeting at Fatak Bazar and emphasized on the necessity of Swadeshi and Swaraj and Hindu-Muslim unity.<sup>15</sup> The cloth merchants of Silchar met Gandhi and took an oath to boycott the foreign cloth while the cloth merchants of nearby Lakhimpur area also sent their pledge of boycotting the foreign cloth.<sup>16</sup> Gandhi’s Assam visit for Non-co-operation was remarkable and even he himself expressed his pleasure when he wrote “Lovely Assam” in Young India.<sup>17</sup>

It is mentioned in the Administrative Report that in the gatherings of the Surma Valley Conference and the Surma Valley Moslem Conference of September 1920 held at Sylhet, “bitter Feeling” was shown and since then the Non-cooperation and Khilafat movement spread throughout the plain districts with increasing activity and rancor.<sup>18</sup> In Surma Valley, however, the Khilafat issue was more powerful since the middle of 1921. The office-bearers of both the Congress and the Khilafat Committees were almost same in the Surma Valley. At the national level, some major political developments were witnessed which had its effect on the Khilafat agitation. The activeness of the Ulema had

increased manifold with the return of Maulana Mahmud ul-Hasan (1851-1920) from his long imprisonment in Malta. His return also brought the Deobandis into the active participation of Khilafat agitation that so far had not been particularly active as to them it was a political movement.<sup>19</sup> The increasing activity of the Jamiat in the political life could also be seen.<sup>20</sup> In the Surma Valley also, the Ulema became active and started playing the major role.

Under the chairmanship Maulana Abdul Munaweir, president of the Assam Provincial Khilafat Committee, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema of the Surma Valley held its third annual conference on 13-14 November 1921 at Karimganj. In that conference, 259 Ulema jointly presented a unanimous fatwa in presence of around eight thousand visitors and provided its support to and offering service for the Khilafat.<sup>21</sup> The Muslim tailors of Sylhet and Karimganj expressed their support for the cause of Khilafat in the meetings held in their mosques and decided not to sew foreign cloth.<sup>22</sup>

The Muslims of Cachar were also annoyed over the issue of Khilafat and the Cachar Khilafat Committee was established under the presidency of Maulana Pir Mahammad Ali of Madhurband. Its permanent office was also established at Silchar.<sup>23</sup> To make the Khilafat agitation more popular and powerful in Cachar, a few Maulanas also toured the district extensively.<sup>24</sup> But the most remarkable aspect of the Khilafat agitation in Cachar was the formation of a strong Volunteer Force. Satindra Mohan Dev was the Captain of the Volunteer Force while Md. Gulezar Ali Mazumder became its Secretary.<sup>25</sup> While in Karimganj subdivision of Sylhet district, the Khilafat meetings were organized at Karimganj, Jakiganj and Birshri. The role of Baghbari Madrasa of Karimganj remained very crucial and with its assistance a market named Khelafatganj was established.<sup>26</sup>

It was mentioned in the report of Deputy Superintendent of Police of Karimganj that a mass meeting of Mohammedans was held on November 9, 1920 at Jakiganj Bazar. Maulvi Abdul Gaffur and Maulvi Abdul Mosabbir of Sylhet addressed the public on the Khilafat issue and urged them to avoid council election.<sup>27</sup> Similar type of meeting was also held at Cheragi Idga near village Sherpur

on November 10, 1920. The speakers talked about Khilafat issue in the presence of 800 people. The meeting was organized by local Mirashdars, most of whom were Muslims.<sup>28</sup> In the meeting at Shaistanagar, Habiganj on November 11, 1920, a Maulana came from Chittagong and spoke with the people quoting certain verses from Koran and requested the people (a) not to vote any candidate in the council election, (b) to boycott foreign goods and (c) to boycott the Government aided Schools. On the next day the Maulana addressed a meeting in Chaudhury Bazar mosque at Habiganj spoke on the same points that he mentioned at Shaistanagar.<sup>29</sup>

The circulation of manuscript notice appealing people to register their names for hand spinning in the Khilafat office in Sylhet was also reported.<sup>30</sup> Sylhet Khilafat Office also appointed Abdul Wahab and Hatim Haji as secretaries of Rural Khilafat Committees and they were given the responsibility to open a register of cases with names of the parties and subject matter of dispute. They were also asked to inspire people to boycott foreign goods, more particularly the English goods and purchasing indigenous products.<sup>31</sup>

The Khilafat agitation was so powerful and active in Sylhet that Syed Abdul Majid (1872-1922), a Assam Minister, became immensely impressed when he visited Karimganj and Sylhet at the end of May and the beginning of June in 1921. He mentioned "I found Sylhet quite changed". He further stated that he would never believe it if he had not seen with his own eyes. Majid also added:

there on the average ten paid preachers in each sub-division who preach disloyalty broadcast in the interior, realize subscriptions and organize village committees who also raise money and settle disputes. Besides these there are hundreds of honorary workers whose duties are just as those of the paid preachers. They have been able to spread a network of organization throughout the district and are creating hatred of Government and Europeans.<sup>32</sup>

However, it seemed that a section of people of Surma Valley were less concern about the boycott of foreign cloths. Muhammad Ali became much angry in a meeting at Sylhet in August 1921 seeing bilati caps used by Muslims and snatched away some of these caps.<sup>33</sup> But at Badarpur, there was some sort of awareness regarding the boycott of foreign cloth. About two thousand people gave their assurance to Gandhi of not using foreign goods.<sup>34</sup>

In the Brahmaputra valley, the Non-Cooperation Movement was more active and strong compare to the Khilafat agitation.<sup>35</sup> But that does not mean that Khilafat movement was absent there. Khilafat agitation was also organized in the valley. In fact both the Khilafat and the Non-cooperation agitation got response there. A public meeting was held in the big mosque at Dhubri on 14 November 1920 under the presidency of Maulana Matlub Hossain [Maulana Matlib Husain]. It was attended by 70 people. Maulvi Abdul Majid Zia-us Shams, the president of the meeting advocated for the use of swadeshi goods and boycotts of foreign ones especially the British articles.<sup>36</sup> A number of prominent leaders led the movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and one of them was Tarun Ram Phookan. He tried to provoke the Muhammadan feelings by stating them that their religion was in danger. He also became the executive member of Assam Provincial Khilafat Committee formed on April 10, 1921 at Gauhati.<sup>37</sup>

Many leaders like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi (1875-1936), Chandranath Sarma, Muhibuddin Ahmed, and Maulvi S. Ambia of Sylhet travelled extensively the Brahmaputra valley since October 1920 propagating the Non- Cooperation.<sup>38</sup> In a meeting of the Assam Association that was held in Sibsagar, Muhibuddin Ahmed one who quit the Sonaram Institute, Gauhati spoke on the Khilafat issue. He condemned the government services and insisted on the Hindu-Muslim unity. According to him, the Islam as well as the divine places like Mecca and the Kerbela was in danger. Maulvi S. Ambia also delivered a provocative speech. Maulvi Ambia stated Lloyd George and his Ministry as 'accursed'. He was in favor of drowning them in the sea like Pharaoh and his men.<sup>39</sup>

Muhammad Ali in his meeting with the principal cloth-dealers of Pan Bazar of Gauhati tried to convince to give up trading of foreign cloths. The Muslim shop-keepers who were present there to see Muhammad Ali responded to his appeal and threw off their foreign head-dress and took oath to boycott foreign cloths.<sup>40</sup>

Seeing the spontaneous response amongst the people in Assam and intensity of the movement, the Government started feeling nervous and was not in a mood to take any risk. The Government came with lots of restrictive measures to suppress the movement. Picketing became unlawful and the Criminal Law Amendment Act was also promulgated to prevent people from participating in the agitation. The Congress Volunteer Corps, the Khilafat Volunteer Corps and numerous other organizations were declared illegal.<sup>41</sup> It can be known from a telegram of the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam to the Government of India, dated 18 December 1921 that the Khilafat meetings organized in rural areas had harmful effect on rural people. He even mentioned that section 144 was inadequate to control the condition. So, to deal with the condition in Sylhet, the authority took the help of the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act (1911) on 23 December 1921. The Act was also implemented in the five districts of Assam Valley excluding Nowgong on 31 January 1922. It empowered the local authority to arrest and imprisons the leaders and workers involved in the movement.<sup>42</sup> Very soon the Act became operative in Cachar and Nowgong also.<sup>43</sup> But the Government crossed all its limit of torture and oppression at Kanairghat of the Surma Valley. In the police firing on an angry mob on 15 February 1922, six people died while 22 became wounded and all of them were from Muslim community. The Kanairghat police firing and the subsequent police atrocities created anger throughout the province.<sup>44</sup>

Community wise breakup of how many people were fined and imprisoned in between November 1921 to January 1922 for their association in political activities and violence is not available. But it is most surprising that only twelve persons were punished in a district like Sylhet where maximum of the Assam Muslims lived. It



is also surprising that even the Civil Departments remained untouched and all the five whose properties were forfeited were Hindus not Muslims.<sup>45</sup> It can be confirmed from the official statement that around 477 Non-Cooperators in the Brahmaputra valley and around 20 in the Surma Valley were imprisoned for various terms in between 24 November 1921 to 31 January 1922. It is mentioned in the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee Report that about 1,100 persons were imprisoned in the different jails. K. N. Dutt writes that more than 4,000 people in the province were put in jail and when there was no space in the jail, prison-camps were made.<sup>46</sup> Mohammad Tayyebulla writes in his book that due to the shortage of space, "previous hundreds were used to be taken out and piled into motor trucks and carriers and taken to long distances and at last left in the jungles at dead of night! More hundreds and more poured in".<sup>47</sup> In Sibsagar of Brahmaputra Valley, restrictions under section 144 and proceedings under section 108, criminal procedure code was enforced against the protesters as well as a group of Muhammadans from Sylhet because of their provocative Khilafat lectures.<sup>48</sup>

### **Role of Students:**

The Khilafat agitation made a further development and underwent a qualitative change with the involvement of the student community.<sup>49</sup> In January 1921, the students started to boycott the schools and colleges respecting the decision of the All India Students' Conference held in December 1920 in Nagpur. The students left their schools and colleges and joined as volunteers to preach the message of Khilafat and Non-cooperation to the people.<sup>50</sup> Leaders like T. R. Phookan, N. C. Bardoloi and Kuladhar Chaliha (1886-1963) who were earlier not in favor of the participation of students in the movement now under circumstances reluctantly approved to boycott classes to only those who would work for the country and go to jail if necessary.<sup>51</sup> Students of the Cotton College also made their mind up to go on strike from the January 20, 1921.<sup>52</sup>

The Government stated in the Assam Legislative Council that around eight to ten percent enrolled students withdrew their

names from the colleges and the Government managed schools. It further reported that one third of this came back within the three weeks of grace allowed by the Director of Public Instruction's Circular Order 29 January 1921. But the Director of Public Instruction estimated about 15,000 students did not come back to their classes.<sup>53</sup> In a reply to a question of Maulavi Saiyid Nurur Rahman in the Assam Legislative Council regarding the number of Mohammedan students in Habiganj High School, the Government presented the following information:<sup>54</sup>

**Table I: Class wise student enrolment in Habiganj High School**

Year	Class III	Class IV	Class V	Class VI	Class VII	Class VIII	Class IX	Class X	Total
1918	14	9	11	11	8	7	12	9	81
1921	4	1	4	5	8	6	3	9	40

C. R. Cunningham, the DPI, after studying the community-wise involvement of students provided the following record of two High Schools of Sylhet and Cachar:<sup>55</sup>

**Table II: Community-wise participation of students**

Year	Muslim Students	Hindu Students	Grand Total
1921	20	56	76
1922	2	15	17

These two tables clearly demonstrate how the Khilafat Movement affected the Muslim students. In the first table it can be seen that the total number of Muslim students became half in 1921 compare to 1918. But the situation in the second table is very gloomy. In the second table, the Muslim students in 1921 were about one third of the Hindus and about one fourth of the total of the two. But in 1922, there was a total fall in the number of the Muslim students. The number of Muslim students reduced to about one eighth of Hindu students and of the total of the two.

### **Lawyers and Title Holders:**

In Assam Valley fifteen lawyers including many renowned had suspended their legal practice and began the arbitration courts in the rural areas. Gandhiji admired them as it was the highest percentage in India. Community-wise breakups of the lawyers though not available but Tayyebulla and Faiznur Ali were amongst the Muslim lawyers who gave up their legal practices. In Sylhet, in the Surma Valley, seven pleaders gave up their legal practice in March 1921 and out of seven only one was Mohammedan.<sup>56</sup>

In all India level, there were total five thousand title holders and Assam's share was hundred and fifteen. Of these hundred and fifteen, fourteen Khan Bahadurs and nine Khan Sahibs were possessed by Muslims. When the agitation was at its peak, only one Hindu title holder, a Rai Bahadur, gave up his title. Amalendu Guha mentions that two title holders threw up their titles by September 1921 but he did not give any community-wise break up.<sup>57</sup> Khan Sahib Nuruddin Ahmad of Nowgong was persuaded to renounce his title and it was seen as the success of Gandhi's visit.<sup>58</sup>

But hostility among a section of both Hindus and Muslims was also observed. In the letter of the Secretary to the Government of Assam, A. W. Botham to the Government of India, it was informed that the Hindus and the Muslims of the Sylhet district regretted the holding of the Surma Valley and the Muslim Conference.<sup>59</sup> Botham also wrote in his letter that the title holders of Sylhet district, many of whom were Muslims, came to a decision to follow Government Pleader Rai Bahadur Promode Chandra Dutt. Dutt vehemently opposed the Non-Co-operation program. M. Kar states that even the Muslim dominated bodies like North Sylhet and Habiganj Local Boards, the Sylhet Municipality and the Anjuman Islamias opposed the idea of boycott.<sup>60</sup>

M. Kar further quotes a Muslim League historian who narrates that Muslims were not in favor of accepting the domination of any non-Muslims in any movement despite it was beneficial for them.<sup>61</sup> Syed Abdul Majid, a minister made his observation about Gandhi's visit to Sylhet district: ".....All were unanimous in thinking that

Gandhi unseen was a far greater personage than Gandhi seen and that his visit to Sylhet has done more harm to their cause than good, and the common people's observation was that he was only a Kaya".<sup>62</sup>

Despite the government's rigorous suppression and along with antagonism from a section of Indians, when the agitations were carrying on successfully, the Congress by its Bardoli resolution of 12 February 1922 called off the mass civil disobedience movement following the Chauri Chaura incident.<sup>63</sup> The Khilafat Movement also met the same fate. It also came to an end with the revolutionary overthrow of the Turkish Sultan from his throne and the consequent change of Khilafat.<sup>64</sup>

The suspension of the movement demoralized the freedom fighters. But we cannot deny the positive aspect of the movement. It generated a revolutionary zeal amongst the Indians which turned Congress into a mass base political platform. Another positive aspect was the immediate official action for the reformation of the local bodies. The introduction of the principle of separate electorates to the local boards for the first time was another remarkable political achievement of the Muslim middle class

It is seen that Muslims were at the front position in holding the Khilafat meetings in Assam and these Khilafat meetings could be leveled as the forerunner of nationalist upsurge in Assam. The active participation of the people of Assam especially the Assam Muslims into the main stream nationalist movement started with the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movement. The agitation produced new leaders who led the national movement during the next three and half decades.

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