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## Train Derailment Activities of Assam In 1942

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### Abstract

*The Quit India Movement (1942) was wholly different in Assam from the earlier ones. Hatred towards the British administration was spontaneously bursting out during the movement. It was helped by some directions and programme of the movement circulated by the APCC (Assam Pradesh Congress Committee) throughout the province. Many among the Congress volunteers took the path of underground activities. One of the main objectives of the Movement in Assam was to paralyze the communication network and for this the following instruction was issued.*

*"All ways of Communication are to be obstructed. Big bridges are to be broken. Railway lines should be pulled off so that there may be obstruction in the military movement and bringing other articles". To realize the programme between August 1942 and March 1943 there were a series of train derailment activities in Assam.*

**Background:** In the Second World War, the aggression of Japanese army to the North East made the situation very tense in Assam. Rangoon and Singapore were occupied by the Japanese army from the British in May 1942 and bombarded on Imphal, Dimapur and Kohima. To stop the Japanese aggression thousands of British and American army were brought to Assam, who set up camps in schools, colleges, forests and even in paddy fields. Because of the heavy concentration of the troops in Assam, public tension was on the increase right from the beginning of 1942.<sup>1</sup> But within a year it reached its climax due to the increasing insanity attitude of a group of armed men. Forcible seizure of

articles from the shops and valuables from the ordinary people, by the military men in a number of places worried and frightened the common people.<sup>2</sup> Dangerous driving and indifference of traffic rules, occasional molestation of women forcible entry into the residential quarters in drunken states intensified the terror further.<sup>3</sup>

In all India level pressure was mounting from China, the United States and Britain to solve the issue of the future status of India before the end of the war. In March 1942, the Prime Minister dispatched Sir Stafford Cripps a member of the War Cabinet to India to discuss the British Government's Draft Declaration. The draft granted India a Dominion Status after the



war but otherwise conceded few changes to the British Government Act of 1935. The draft was unacceptable to the Congress Working Committee who rejected it. The failure of the Cripps Mission further estranged the Congress and the British Government.<sup>4</sup>

Gandhi seized upon the failure of the Cripps Mission, the advances of the Japanese in South-East Asia and the general frustration with the British in India. He called for a voluntary British withdrawal from India. The All India Congress Committee assembled in Allahabad from 29 April to 1 May 1942, to discuss the resolution of the Working Committee. Although Gandhi was absent from the meeting, many of his points were admitted into the resolution; the most significant of them being the commitment to non-violence. On 14 July 1942, the Congress Working Committee met again at Wardha and resolved that it would authorize Gandhi to take charge of the non-violent mass movement. The Resolution, generally referred to as the 'Quit India' resolution, was to be approved by the All India Congress Committee meeting in Bombay in August.<sup>5</sup>

The All India Congress Committee met in Bombay on 7 to 8 August 1942 as scheduled and ratified the 'Quit India' resolution. It was declared in the resolution that the immediate ending of the British rule in India was an urgent necessity, both for the sake of India and for the success of the cause of the United Nations. India had become the crux of the question. Great Britain and United Nations will be judged by the independence of India. Addressing the Congress delegates on the night of 8<sup>th</sup> August Gandhiji said, "I, therefore want freedom immediately, this very night, if it

can be had. You may take it from me that I am not going to strike a bargain with the Viceroy for ministers and the like. I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom. Here is a *Mantra*, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint in your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The Mantra is: 'Do or die'. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery".<sup>6</sup> It was decided that Jawaharlal Nehru was to explain on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942 to the United States to scope and contents of the 'Quit India' resolution.<sup>7</sup>

It appears that the Government had already finalized their plans to arrest the Congress leaders and crush their movement and consequently. In the early hours of the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Acharya Kripalini,<sup>8</sup> etc. all members of the Congress Working Committee and other Congress leaders were arrested by the British Government under the Defence of India Rules.<sup>9</sup>

The few leaders who had escaped arrest went into hiding and tried to guide the mass movement. Among them were Jai Prakash Narayan, S. M. Joshi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Ram Manohar Lohis, Achyut Patwardhan and Smt Sucheta Kripalani.<sup>10</sup>

In Assam the Government planned to arrest all the office bearers of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee and other Congress leaders of Assam before 5 A.M. on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly the Government detained all the leaders including the President, Maulavi T. Tayyabullah, Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed, Bishnuram Medhi, Dr. Hare

Krishnha Das, Liladhar Barooah, D. Sarma(Jorhat) and others were arrested.<sup>12</sup>

Along with the rest of India many Assamese leaders like Jyotiprasad Agarawala and Gahan Chandra Goswami of Darrang, Mahendra Nath Hazarika and Lakshmi Prasad Goswami of Nagaon, Sankar Chandra Barua of Golalaghat, Brajanath Sarma of Kamrup district went underground to organize a resistance movement. The underground workers through its cells or secret offices carried out disruptive activities.<sup>13</sup> One of the main objectives of the underground movement in Assam was to paralyse the communication network and for this the following instruction were issued.<sup>14</sup>

1. All ways of communication are to be obstructed. Big bridges are to be broken. Railway lines should be pulled off so that there may be obstruction in the military movement and bringing other articles.
2. Postal department is to be brought to a standstill by all means. If trains and steamers can be stopped postal department will be unworkable automatically. To stopped the working of the postal department try your best to obstruct railways and steamers.
3. Cut telegraph wires as early and in as many places as possible. In that case news from one place to another will not reach and the Government will also not know about happenings in different places.

Before this bulletin reached to the underground workers, the ideology of derailment of trains in Assam was spread. Gopinath Bordoloi and Siddhinath Sarma were arrested on a train at Dhubri after returning from Congress Session in

Bombay. When they were being brought to the jail, Tarun Sen Deka Communist leader of Assam, asked Siddhinath Sarma on what grounds should the movement be carried forward, whether it be violence or non-violence. To this Siddhinath Sarma replied "It is not a question of violence and non-violence. We need to do everything to achieve independence. If needed even train lines will be broken".<sup>15</sup> With this view a series of train derailment were carried out by underground *mrityubahini* (Suicide Squad) under different heads all over the province.

The only means of effective communication of the time was railways. Hence the British Government used the railways to carry the military personals and supply of foods, arms and ammunition etc. A common method used by the activists to disrupt supplies to the army was the derailment of trains carrying used such supplies. Derailment was generally caused by removing fish-plats from the railway lines.

**Train Derailment activities:** The first train derailment incident in Assam in the Quit India movement was carried out by a *mrityu bahini* (suicide squad) group of Nagaon under the direction of Lakhsmi Prasad Goswami and leadership of Bhibiram Bora. The incident took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1942, the main line was sabotaged at two places on either side of Kampur and beyond Jamunamukh which led to derailment of an engine and several goods wagon were damaged. Then, on 24<sup>th</sup> August, living quarters near the Phulaguri Station were set on fire. The same day, tracks and sleepers on the Dimow Railway Bridge were removed resulting in the derailment of another goods train. No casualties were reported for these

incidents. Several wooden bridges on the Assam Trunk Road too were burnt down.<sup>16</sup> The police failed to arrest any of the suspected saboteurs involved in these derailment cases. The following *mrityu bahini* members of Nagaon were took part in the derailment incident, Khagen Bora of Hatisung, Rameswaer Das of Kujidah, Kuarpur, Aman Bhuyan of Dighaliati, Bhaben Bora Nayak of Kuruabahi, Mohan Nath of Jamuguri and even others were involved.<sup>17</sup>

Few days after the incident under the leadership of Mahendra Hazarika of Nagaon, along with a gang of suicide squad attempted to derail the military train brought towards Nagaon but attempt was in vain. The line inspector detected the removal of train lines. The train carried military personals to the Sarubhagia Camp of Nagaon. Phanidhar Hazarika, Nishikanta Mahanta, Ratna Gayan, Dinabandhu Saikia, Chandra Kanta Bora, Minaram Hazarika and other *mrityu Bahini* army were involved.<sup>18</sup>

In Sibsagar district a train was derailed on the 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1942, on the main line at Kashjan near Titabar. The Government suspected the involvement of skilled co-workers like ex-Digboi strikers and the ex-students of Nagaon.<sup>19</sup> On the same day at 1.52 in the night, a train carrying British soldiers got derail about one kilometer away from the Sarupathar railway Station. According to witness, about one thousand soldiers were killed in the accident. It was a handy work by the *mrityu bahini*. Fishplates were removed from the track and hence the derailment took place.<sup>20</sup> The chief architecture of the Sarupathar derailment was Sankar Chandra Barua.<sup>21</sup> On the very day of the incident he visited the site of the accident<sup>22</sup> and sent Tilak

Bora and his company to remove the fish-plate of the train line.<sup>23</sup> According to the instruction of the leader the sabotage work started at 11 P.M. About a furlong away armed soldiers of *mrityu bahini* comprising Pulin Bihari Barua, Soneswar Konwar, Gangadhar Ahom and Madan Phukan were guarding the site. The work of removing the fish –plates was entrusted to Indreswar Phukan, Surya Saikia, Dharmeswar Barua, Kanakeswar Kaonwar and Dharma Kanta Deka. In uprooting the nails of the rails with the help of Chabul, Majupitou Konwar, Ghanasyam Saikia, Nagaen Chutia and Putou Saikia were engaged. Within an hour they succeed to remove three pieces of rail line from each side.<sup>24</sup>

After completing the work they disappeared from the site. But Sankar Barua waited for the confirmation of the derailment at the balcony of Surendra Nath Roy, the owner of Dewpani Tea Garden, not very far from the spot. On hearing the sound of the accident, Sankar Barua silently slipped out from the bungalow left the place for unknown destination. Government could not detected any clue in connection of the train derailment with Sankar Barua.<sup>25</sup>

The police failed to arrest anyone for lack of evidence in the incidences of derailment before the Sarupathar rail derailment incident. C.A. Humphrey was the district magistrate of Jorhat at that time. He made a plan to stop the sabotage on trains by accusing all the Congress party members of Sarupathar and issued an arrest against all of them.<sup>26</sup> To materialized his plan, immediately after the accident, police and army personals cordon of the Sarupathar area and indulged in indiscriminate atrocities and arrests.

Numerous freedom fighters were framed in the accident and jailed. During that time Kushal Konwar was advised by many to go underground but Konwar refused. Since Konwar was a prominent leader of the Golaghat district Congress Committee, he too was falsely implicated and arrested along with 42 others.<sup>27</sup> On that ground of being under trial, Kushal Konwar and others were sent to jail, on the order of Golaghat jail, on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1942. In Jorhat Jail Kushal Konwar spent all together 221 days. Kushal Konwar spent the first 121 days as an under trial prisoner and the next 100 days in solitary confinement as a prisoner with dead sentence.<sup>28</sup>

In Sibsagar sub-division between Lakwa and Safrai rail sabotage was planned by the same group of the underground activists of Golaghat. A considerable length of track was removed on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1943 in the said place which led to the Up-Upper Assam Mail where thrown off three bogies. In this incident eight Indian soldiers were spot dead and 28 injured three of who died later. The majority of the casualties reported to be military personal.<sup>29</sup> The *mrityubahini* activists Karuna Gogoi, Umakanta Rajkumar, Lakhsewar Gogoi and 20 members were involved in the incidents. Lack of Chabul they used *Bhaluka* bamboo to digging earth. They had only one ranch to remove the bolt. They succeeded in removing the train lines in two different areas. In a place 400 feet and in another place 50 feet train lines were removed.

The police arrested 60 persons out of suspect. Houses were broken and valuable goods were taken away during the house search for suspects.<sup>30</sup>

In Jorhat Sub-division while attempting to disrupt the railway communication system the underground workers removed four pair of fish-plates and 12 bolts from mile 464/1-2 near Hutly Railway Station, near Golaghat, on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1942. An obstruction case against one Kamal Saikia who was believed to have been involved in this connection was registered by Mariani G.R.P.S.<sup>31</sup> Again, on 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1942 some bolts and nuts of railway line between Kamarbandha and Soketing railway station were removed. However the railway line was immediately put in order.<sup>32</sup>

In Kamrup district, according to Government report, a powerful bomb exploded at around 8-40 P.M. on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1942 on a shunting Engine in the lower wagon ferry shunting yard at Pandu, Guwahati. The force of the explosion ripped off the top of the engine cab in one piece and sent it hurtling through the air for a distance of about 40 yards. The driver and the fireman were also hurled about 40 yards and the former being killed on the spot and the latter together with two points men who were on the engine plate were so severely injured and died shortly afterwards in hospital. Before this explosion a box of dynamite was stolen from a godown. But the British Government denied the incident as sabotage.<sup>33</sup>

While the investigation of Sarupathar rail derailment case was going on another train sabotage was carried out by a small group of eleven freedom fighters, on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1942. They completed the task at the risk of certain death if caught. The train was carrying military troops 'approximate 600'<sup>34</sup> to fight with the Japanese and the INA combine force under

Subhas Bose in the North –East frontier. The derailment took place at Panbari near Panikhaiti Railway Station, about 30 Kms east of the city of Guwahati, Assam, killing the driver , fireman, four other Indian ranks and seriously injuring forty-one more. There were two more serious sabotage incidents, one between Patiya Gaon and Gossaigaon section in January 1943 and the other at Rangia on March 1943 causing to fatal cases.<sup>35</sup> The eleven *Mrityu Bahini* personals involved in this sabotage were Bibhiram Bora, Mahadananda Deva Goswami, Manik Bora, Dhanpur Laskar, Rupram Sut, Kameswar Bordaloi, Benudhar Deka, Madhu Keot, Dadhiram Bordaloi, Layayam Medhi and Bhugaram Deka. This was architect by Lakhi Prasad Goswami and implemented under the leadership of Bibhiram Bora. In the group only Mahadananda Deva Goswami was,<sup>40</sup> years of age and other were young<sup>36</sup>. Before they started their task, they took vows lighting incense stick as a witness of fire that even if one of them was captured and tortured he wouldn't disclosed the name of his companions<sup>37</sup>. Most of the Panikhaiti derailment activists were arrested in different places and times. They were imprisoned only on suspect but released want of evidence.<sup>38</sup>

The mastermind of this incident was Mahendranath Hazarika and the famous lawyer Surendra Nath Hazarika. The incident was upheld by underground leader Laksimi Prasad Goswami. After directing the derailment in Panikhaiti, Goswami disguised himself as a supply inspector and fled from Nagaon to Guwahati via Tezpur. Before he reached his shelter place Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua's home the Panikhaiti Train derailment was

completed.<sup>39</sup> In Kamrup district, the same -fish-plats removal method was used in the Kendukana Train derailment incident. It was completed by a group of *mrityu bahini* led by Prabhat Sarma of Bahjani. Many military personals and war materials were destroyed in the incident. Another goods train was met an accident in March, 1943, on the bridge of Puthimari, where fish-plats were removed by Rama Sarma and his group consisting of 10-15 persons with tools. While the work was going on symbolic signals were used like "danger" – "neu-neu" like a sound of owl ( the neu-neu sound of owl believes by the Assamese people as unexpected danger ahead); "Safety" or "carry on" signal was thrilling sound of owl (the superstition of thrilling sound of owl is marry time ahead) after regular interval . Work completed signal was "Hua-hua" ( sound like a fox) and "khek-khek" (like monkey). The task was completed by the group within an hour and it stopped the communication for 15-20 days.<sup>40</sup>

To interrupt the railway communications the underground activists also used country made bomb in some places of Assam. A bomb was exploded in the Nalbari Railway Station in the Inter & 3<sup>rd</sup> class waiting room of the said station 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1942. The bomb was highly explosive and dangerous one. Though no casualty was caused, one door was damaged and all the glass panes affixed to the door, widows, and wind screens were broken to pieces.<sup>41</sup> Though it created chaos in the station for some time but could not interrupt the schedule of train communications.

Goalpara and Rangia in Kamrup district two trains were derailed in the



month of January and March 1943 respectively . According to Government report two passengers were died in the spot.<sup>42</sup>

In Sylhet district, within three months, fish-plats of train line were removed in three different places.<sup>43</sup> The Surma Valley Mail was derailed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1942 at Itakhola, near Saistaganj spat. According to Government report ten persons died on the spot and 36 were seriously wounded. The Government suspected the involvement of ex- terrorists of Sylhet and Tripura State in the railway sabotage activities.<sup>44</sup> The incident was a serious one and was not they do hide. But the activists took extra ordinary precautions about not to leaking out the names of the workers who were engaged. Therefore the Government could not get any clue to trace out the culprits. Other two derailment case of Latu and Badarpur were made not public because the damage wasn't heavy.<sup>45</sup> There were innumerable cases of rural youths tempering with the railway lines.<sup>46</sup>

The police failed to arrest any of the suspected saboteurs involved in these derailment cases because the activists took extraordinary precaution, secrecy and even in some cases they had taken vows not to disclose the event. The *mrityu bahini* freedom fighters were so serious in their task and responsibility that even co-workers had not been informed. For train derailment, tools were collected from domestic houses and sometime looted from Government and tea garden's store rooms. Some time necessary tools were ordered by manufacturing. Such tools for train derailment of Panbari were incidentally manufactured by a garage owner whose grandfather was involved in

the Chattagram Armed Robbery Case (Bengal). His grandfather was expelled from Bengal for the incident and started to reside permanently in Nagaon.<sup>47</sup> Though the work of train derailment was not supported by all but nobody openly protest against such devastating tasks. Padmanath Borthakur expressed that he was completely against the train derailment and government house burning incident. Tanusyam Goswami asked a wrench from the store where Borthakur was serviced , he refused to give a wrench but handed him ten rupee note to purchase a wrench with which a train derailment was carried out. The very next day Tanusyam Goswami saw the wrench to Borthakur and informed him on which day and place they going to derail the trains in Lakwa and Namati Ali Station. Exactly in the same places two train accident s were held in later days.<sup>48</sup> One ready method in the hands of the Government for cowing down the people was realizing collective fines near the train accident areas. There was no basis of assessment, the whims of the S.D.O. or police officer being the deciding factor. In most cases no receipt was given to the payer. Very often again a large amount would be extorted, but receipt for a smaller denomination would be given. Properties were accessed in lieu of these fines and auctioned. Even utensils and cloths of daily used were not spared. The atrocities committed during the realization of this fine have been described in their proper places.<sup>49</sup>

Beside this forced labour was too much in vogue for the cases. Villagers living near the railway lines were compelled to guard the lines for more than a year. They were not given any remuneration, nor were they provided with cloths, lamps and other

necessary things. Even in the winter people had to do this job shivering for the whole night. People from 16 to 55 years were requisitioned to do this work. It was done in rotation and turn would generally come after a week or a fortnight. Special constables were made of villagers living near places where there was interference with railway lines or telegraphic wires. People refusing to submit to this type of work were either fined or jailed. As for instance, Hari Prasad Roy, Khagen Roy, Umesh Chakravarty, Bhabani Prasad Singetc. Goalpara were convicted and sent to jail for refusing to serve in this manner.<sup>50</sup>

According to Tayyabulla, a Gandhian Congress leader, the train derailment incident in all over India during the Quit India Movement was mainly responsible, Musriwala and his "*harizan patrika*". Because *Harizan patrika* covered all and any congress related news whose editor in chief was Musriwala of *Sevagram Ashram*? Tayyabulla explained, Gandhiji did not give any specific directions to Musriwala about the method of freedom movement, but he still quoted from the *Vedas* and supported vandalizing of British vehicles which he wrote in the *Harizan*

*Patrika*. There were many circulars sent by anonymous users which was wide spread confusion related to the circulars between Indian Congress workers and various revolutionaries, which led to the violence movement throughout the country. Removal of train lines, sabotages of military goods train etc. was mainly because of the impact of Musriwala's *harizan patrika*.<sup>51</sup>

**Conclusion:** Many among the freedom fighters who took to the path of extremism realized that the most effective way to hurt the British was by undermining their war effort. And to do so the easiest means was by disrupting the movement of troops and supplies to the frontline. Assam in those days had very poor road connectivity and only one meter gauge railway. The wooden bridges on the Assam Trunk Road and the railway became the most tempting targets to the saboteurs and the most vulnerable and difficult to protect for the British Government. Records reveal that between August 1942 and March 1943 there were a series of train derailment activities in Assam. If they executed their plans successfully the number of derailment would be much more.

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