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History through Autobiography: Militant Revolutionism in the Colonial Brahmaputra Valley 1930-42: A Historical Account

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Abstract: While nationalist historiography emphasises Gandhi-INC passive resistance, it marginalises grassroots revolutionary movements. Although scholarship exists on revolutionary activities in Bengal, Maharashtra, and Lahore, the Brahmaputra Valley's revolutionary anti-colonial struggles remain unexplored. In the early 1930s, clandestine groups operating through fitness clubs and gymnasiums mobilised youth toward militant resistance, yet this crucial development lacks scholarly attention. This paper reconstructs underground anti-colonial activities in colonial Brahmaputra Valley (1930-1942) through Haridas Deka's autobiography *Jiwan Aru Sangram* (Life and Struggle) (2011). Deka (1919-1993), a revolutionary-turned-communist leader, provides unprecedented insights into covert operations, organisational structures, and key figures. This paper addresses how did revolutionary networks emerge and operate in Assam and what methodologies and ideologies guided these movements. Further, it examines the underground activities which transform into Assam's radical communist movement. By analysing Deka's firsthand account, this study illuminates the neglected revolutionary dimensions of Assam's anti-colonial struggle.

Keywords: *Militant Revolutionism, Colonial Brahmaputra Valley, Vyayam Sangha, Autobiography, Radical Communist Movement*

Introduction

Autobiographies of revolutionaries offer a unique lens into the history of militant revolution, providing political accounts, personal experiences, and perspectives that can serve as sources of historical narratives. By studying the autobiographies of revolutionaries, scholars of history can get insights into outlining the historical framework of revolutions in colonial India as this category of autobiographies situates the history of revolutions as an important component in the emergent history of India's independence.¹ This paper scrutinises renowned revolutionary Haridas Dekha's autobiography, *Jiwan Aru Sangram*, which falls under the category of political autobiography that presents readers with an intimate view of militant revolutionism in colonial Brahmaputra Valley and the subsequent rise of the radical communist movement. This paper constructs this broad historical understanding covering the period from 1930 to 1942. Further it tries to revisit a radical anti-colonial trend within the freedom struggle of India that is deliberately ignored in the existing historical works.

The historiography of colonial India often emphasises nationalist politics, particularly non-violent strategies of leaders like Gandhi, while overlooking the grassroots revolutionary movements that played a significant role in the anti-colonial struggle.² This tendency has shaped a narrative that marginalises that contributions of revolutionary groups, framing them as aberrant or secondary to the mainstream nationalist discourse. Further it dismisses revolutionary movements as violent and less legitimate, thus relegating them to the periphery of historical accounts.³ Revolutionary groups, such as those led by Bhagat Singh, are frequently celebrated in popular culture but receive limited academic attention.⁴ Films and popular narratives have begun to recuperate revolutionary histories, yet they often reinforce the dominate nationalist ethos, framing revolutionary violence within a context of eventual reconciliation with non-violence. Jangam⁵ examines how Indian historiography often prioritises privileged caste Hindus as 'heroes' of nationalism, overlooking grassroots revolutionary movements, particularly led by Dalits. This narrative marginalises Dalit contributions and their struggles against caste inequality, which were crucial to the anti-colonial movement. Maclean⁶ suggests archival and

¹ Ghosh, Durba. "Revolutionary Autobiographies: Postcolonial Tellings of Nationalist History."

² Kachwala, "Recovering History".

³ Singh, *The place of Revolutionary Violence in India*.

⁴ Maclean, "The History of a Legend".

⁵ Jangam, *Dalits and the making of modern India*.

⁶ Maclean, "Imagining the Indian nationalist movement."

autobiographical research can significantly challenge or reinforce existing literature on anti-colonial movements by providing nuanced, personal insights that illuminates broader collective experiences.

Autobiographical approach allows scholars to connect individual narratives with larger socio-political contexts, thereby enriching understanding of regional resistance dynamics. Further it can serve as valuable historical sources, offering unique insights into subjective experiences and perspective that enrich the understanding of historical events. However, autobiographical accounts can be seen as reliable historical sources, but their limitations include potential biases. The challenge of verifying personal narratives against ‘archives’, and such difficulty often locate in categorising women’s autobiographical writings.⁷ Smith and Jenkins⁸ advocates autobiographical methods include life stories, which can uncover marginalised voices in social movements in India by capturing personal narratives that intertwine with institutional accounts, revealing complexities of vulnerability and enriching understating of activists’ subjective experiences. It also helps to document narratives which have been historically silenced and fostering community engagement and enriching public memory beyond traditional archival sources.⁹ Ashutosh Kumar¹⁰ discusses the importance of incorporating marginalised voices of lower castes and Dalits, through autobiographical research methods such as oral history and life stories, which can reveal their unique experiences often overlooked in traditional narratives of Indian social movements. Autobiographical studies can significantly illuminate historical military revolutionism in South Asia by providing personal narratives that contextualise broader scholarship on social movement.

Regarding anti-colonial movement literature, this paper addresses a significant geographical and ideological gap in existing scholarship. While much of the literature on Indian anti-colonial movements has focused on developments in major urban centres and the activities of mainstream nationalist organisations, it brings attention to the peripheral yet crucial role of Northeastern India, particularly Assam, in the broader struggle for independence. The paper challenges the dominant narrative that has often marginalised regional movements, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of India’s anti-colonial struggle. Central to this investigation is the utilisation of Deka’s firsthand autobiographical account, which serves as a primary source offering intimate insights into the lived experiences of revolutionary activists. Through careful analysis of this personal narrative, the research illuminates previously neglected dimensions of Assam’s anti-colonial

⁷ Lambert-Hurley, “Life/History/Archive.”

⁸ Smith & Jenkins, “Civil society activists and vulnerability in South India.”

⁹ Mahajan, “Beyond the archives.”

¹⁰ Kumar, “Alternative history of indenture.”

struggle, revealing the human stories behind political movements and the personal sacrifices made by individuals committed to revolutionary change. This autobiographical lens provides access to the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of revolutionary participation that are often absent from official historical records. By combining autobiographical methodology with political history, this paper also contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship, demonstrating how literary and historical approaches can be integrated to produce richer, more nuanced understandings of political movements. It focuses on the transformation from underground activities to organised political movements provides valuable insights for scholars interested in the evolution of revolutionary organisations and their transition from resistance to mainstream political participation.

Methodological Framework

This paper employs autobiographical research as its primary methodological framework, drawing upon the rich tradition of life writing analysis in South Asian historiography. Autobiographical sources in colonial and postcolonial contexts serve not merely as individual testimonies but as windows into collective experiences and social transformations. As Ashis Nandy¹¹ argues, autobiography in the Indian context functions as a form of ‘intimate history’ that reveals the psychological and cultural dimensions of political resistance often absent from official records. This approach is particularly relevant for studying clandestine revolutionary activities, where conventional archival sources remain limited or inaccessible.

Haridas Deka’s *Jiwan Aru Sangram* (Life and Struggle, 2011) serves as the primary source for this investigation. This autobiography represents what David Arnold¹² terms a ‘testimonial narrative’ – a form of life writing that explicitly aims to document political struggle and social transformation. The selection of this text is justified Deka’s dual identity as both revolutionary activist and later communist leader provides a unique vantage point for understanding the ideological evolution of anti-colonial movements in Assam. His narrative spans the crucial transition period from underground resistance to organised political movement, offering insights into both phases of anti-colonial struggle. Shahid Amin’s¹³ analysis of memory and peasant consciousness provides a crucial methodological framework for understanding how individual recollections intersect with broader social narratives (Amin, 1995). This study applies Amin’s insights help us to examine how Deka’s personal memories of revolutionary activity reflect and refract larger patterns of anti-colonial resistance in Assam.

¹¹ Nandy, “Histories forgotten doubles.”

¹² Arnold & Blackburn, *Telling lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*.

¹³ Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*.

This paper acknowledges the ethical complexities involved in analysing autobiographical narratives, particularly those involving clandestine political activities. Following the guidelines established by Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman¹⁴ for research involving personal narratives of violence and resistance, this study maintains sensitivity to the political and personal stakes involved in revolutionary testimony. The analysis respects Deka's agency as narrator while maintaining critical distance necessary for historical analysis. This involves what Gayatri Spivak¹⁵ calls 'response-ability' – the researcher's ethical obligation to respond to the text without appropriating or ventriloquising the narrator's voice. This methodology acknowledges several inherent limitations. The reliance on a single autobiographical source, while methodologically justified, necessarily constrains the scope of analysis. The paper's findings should be understood as preliminary contributions to a larger project of recovering Assam's revolutionary history rather than definitive conclusions. The temporal gap between events and narration introduces potential distortions, while the Deka's later communist affiliation may influence his retrospective interpretation of earlier revolutionary activities. These limitations are addressed through transparent acknowledgment and, where possible, external corroboration.

From *Satyagraha* to Underground Revolution in Assam (1930)

One afternoon in February 1930, a group of young Congress volunteers staged a *satyagraha* in Fancy Bazar, Guwahati, located on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra. During their demonstration, they chanted slogans and campaigned against purchasing foreign clothes and consuming liquor and opium from government-licensed shops. Law enforcement authorities arrested all the young volunteers present at the demonstration, including two notable figures—Rajen Kalita and Upendra Navish.¹⁶ Mr. Khargeswar Sarma, one of the local notables, dismissed the *satyagraha* as ineffective. He proposed to the young volunteers that instead of engaging in hollow sloganeering, they should directly attack and destroy the outlets selling these harmful intoxicants.¹⁷

After the authorities released them overnight, Mr. Sarma met with the young volunteers and proposed demolishing the liquor and opium shops. The volunteers accepted his proposal, and Rajen Kalita and Khargeswar Sarma, accompanied by Krishna Choudhury and Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya, raided and burned down the opium and liquor outlets at Silpukhuri, Beltola bazaar, and Shenmela village of Beltala Mouza. Following this success, they burned down several other such outlets in scattered rural

¹⁴ Das & Kleinman, *Violence and Subjectivity*.

¹⁵ Spivak, *A Critique of postcolonial reason*.

¹⁶ Deka, *Jiwan Aru Sangram*, p.17

¹⁷ Ibid. p.17

locations using the same method. After this incident, the small secret group convened a meeting to discuss more effective courses of action. Haridas Deka, quoting from Khargeswar Sarma's handwritten account, writes in his autobiography:

“Afterwards, a meeting was convened at the house of Prafulla Mohan Biswas on the west side of Sharanian Hill. The persons present at the meeting were: Khargeswar Sarma, Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya, Prafulla Biswas, Rajen Kalita, Upen Navish, Devpal Das, Lohit Das, and Hans Nath Medhi. Another person, Manishankar Basumatary, arrived late at the meeting.”¹⁸

The meeting participants questioned the effectiveness of the Gandhian approach of passive resistance through *Satyagraha* and concluded that such redundant tactics would not achieve *Purna Swaraj*. These young volunteers agreed that they could not achieve freedom without sacrifice and violence, and they decided to launch a militant course of action. The meeting also assigned specific duties to each group member. The group entrusted Rajen Kalita and Khargeswar Sarma with mobilising cadres, while they assigned the task of raising funds to Upendra Navish. They tasked Deben Kalita, who owned an iron workshop and possessed expertise in gun repair in Kamarpatti near Fancy Bazar, with collecting and manufacturing weapons and ammunition, while they appointed Hans Nath Medhi as treasurer. For the group's immediate use, Deben Kalita crafted a dagger sheath.

Haridas Deka noted that locals named the place Kamarpatti in Panbazar as such because two other iron workshops operated there besides Deben Kalita's. Devpal Das served as the group's spy. The group instructed him to engage in contract work at the Guwahati *Sadr* Police Station and Police Reserve so that police would not easily suspect him. Thus, during the civil disobedience movement, this small group of Congress volunteers—disillusioned with the Congress approach to the freedom struggle—laid the foundation for underground activities in the colonial Brahmaputra Valley.¹⁹ The group also formed an action committee to determine their future course of activities. Khargeswar Sarma, Rajen Kalita, and Prafulla Mohan Biswas comprised the action committee members. The action committee carried out their plans under Khargeswar Sarma's supervision.

In their first agenda, the action committee decided to assassinate twelve District Commissioners from the then twelve districts. Though they had crafted a few handmade pistols with Deben Kalita's help, implementing this daring agenda required more arms and ammunition. However, they lacked the necessary funds for this purpose. To collect funds, the group planned to rob a forest officer in Dhubri. To their utter dismay, their plan failed, and the police caught and arrested both Rajen Kalita and

¹⁸ Ibid, p.17 —authors' own translation from Assamese to English.

¹⁹ ibid, p.18

Khargeswar Sarma. Deka's autobiography provides vivid descriptions of this incident, offering clear evidence that the secret group adopted political *dacoity* as a means to raise funds.

The Deputy Commissioner of Dhubri personally presided as judge for this conspiracy case. The police convicted other group members in connection with the case but failed to extract confessions of their involvement. The court sentenced Rajen Kalita and Khargeswar Sarma to two years of rigorous imprisonment for possessing revolvers and bullets without a license. The authorities sent Mr. Sarma to Tezpur jail and Kalita to Jorhat jail. Rajen Kalita endured severe torture while imprisoned and died of tuberculosis in 1934 at his home shortly after his release. Following this incident, the secret group became inactive. Thus, the first secret group of colonial Brahmaputra Valley disbanded with the death of its radical leader Rajen Kalita during its formative stage. Though this group lacked a proper action plan, they earned recognition in the history of the freedom struggle for initiating underground activities in the colonial Brahmaputra Valley, which had a lasting impact on Assam's revolutionary movement. This secret group published a handwritten magazine called *Aahuti* during their operations. As Haridas Deka claimed, historians can regard it as Assam's first political magazine.²⁰ More appropriately, one can call it the first mouthpiece of the militant revolutionary movement in Assam.

After the secret group disbanded, Devpal Das continued the legacy of clandestine activities through a small study circle. Haren Kalita preserved some 'proscribed and seditious' literature and documents from the former secret group. Thus, revolutionary literature continued circulating on a small scale in Guwahati even after the first secret group dissolved. Their handwritten magazine *Aahuti*, which had ceased publication for several months, revived and returned to circulation under the initiative of Haren Kalita, Rajen Kalita's younger brother, and Haridas Deka, who were then students at Kamrup Academy. This magazine gained widespread popularity among Cotton College students as well as in other Guwahati schools.

Since the civil disobedience movement, youths developed a tendency to work on their physique and enhance their combat skills. Therefore, they took initiatives to establish gymnasia and youth clubs in places like Uzanbazar, Senikuthi, Harisabha, and Barpetiapara in Panbazar, Paltan Bazar, and Takaubari. In 1933, with the INC's patronage and under Devpal Das's initiative, they established the *Gauhati Vyayam Sangha*. This organisation aimed to provide physical and moral training to youths, undertake social welfare work, and conduct relief operations during natural calamities. As Haridas Deka quoted:

²⁰ *ibid*, p.21

The inaugural ceremony was held at Curzon Hall near Cotton College and presided over by Nabin Chandra Bordoloi. The main objectives of *Vyayam Sangha* were character development and fitness training for the youth; social welfare works like helping the poor sections of society, providing relief to flood-affected peoples, etc. Figures like Mahendra Mohan Choudhury and Radhikaram Das served as its president. Rabin Nabish, advocate Upendranath Sarma, etc. held the position of secretary. For a short period, Haren Kalita served as the secretary of Vyayam Sangha, and I was a member of the executive committee.

Most of the early members of *Vyayam Sangha* served as Congress volunteers. *Vyayam Sangha* initiated vital public welfare works across the region. During various events, the organisation collected funds and offerings from the masses to help flood-affected people in different regions. During the visits of Mahatma Gandhi (1934), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1938), and Subhas Chandra Bose (1938) to Guwahati, *Vyayam Sangha* played an important role in making them aware of Assam's fundamental issues. Through these interactions, *Vyayam Sangha* established close contact with the youths of the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1937, the Assam Legislative Assembly held its election. The members of *Vyayam Sangha* worked hard for the Indian National Congress in the election campaign. After the Congress formed its cabinet, the government released the young prisoners from Sylhet who had been jailed for the Tinsukia mail robbery case.²¹ Haridas Deka wrote:

On the day of their release, the members of the *Vyayam Sangha* welcomed them from the jail gate and a group feast was organised in the house of Sarat Barua, a resident of Chenikuthi. The members of Jayam Sangha also participated in the feast.

Circulation of the magazine *Aahuti*, underground activities of *Vyayam Sangha* and vibrant political engagements among its members prepared a fertile ground for a rigorous political ideology to thrive among the youth of Assam.

The Rise of Communist Movement in Assam (1930-1942)

The period from 1930 to 1942 witnessed the spread of socialist and communist ideology and the formation of scattered communist groups across various parts of Assam. The organisation, scope, ideology, and leadership of these groups profoundly influenced the youth of Brahmaputra Valley, particularly those who had become highly radicalised in their political outlook and approach out of sheer desperation. Gandhi's non-violent struggle failed to appeal to their temperament. The youth

²¹ A combined group of six revolutionary belonging to both valleys carried out a daring dacoity near Tinsukia on the Down Assam Mail on 11 June 1934 and looted about Rs. 3000/- from the mailvan. The police suspected the involvement of the Bengal Yugantor group in this case. The police arrested six persons and recovered some stolen property. —Home. Political. File No. 18/6/34-Poll., F.R., June, NAI as cited in *Political History of Assam*, Vol-II, p.274

became increasingly vocal after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1931) and began openly citing and embracing the examples set by young revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru. They gradually shifted their inclination and energy toward political radicalism and adopted a militant revolutionary approach, which eventually fostered the growth of a more politically volatile communist movement in Assam during the 1940s.

Toward the end of 1937, Soumendra Nath Tagore, an internationally renowned communist leader and grand-nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, visited Guwahati. He represented the Communist Party of India at the Communist International. Hitler had imprisoned him in Germany for his involvement in communist activities. After his release from prison, he collaborated with Romain Rolland to form the Anti-Fascism Committee and launch an anti-fascist movement. However, following his disagreements with the Comintern and Stalin,²² he returned to India and established the Communist League (1934), which he later renamed as the Communist League of India (1938) and subsequently as the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (1943).

In November 1938, Saumyendranath Tagore was invited to deliver a lecture at the Cotton College on the topic “India and Socialism”, and later, he met a few members from *Vyayam Sangha* and students at Cotton College in the house of Jnanadabiram Barua. The members of *Vyayam Sangha* were greatly impressed by Tagore’s independent communist platform. Tagore’s experience with international communist coordination, and the class dimensions he introduced in the context of the Digboi oil strikes and the general unrest.²³

“For two days we discussed in detail about various topics such as the international situation, national situation, the nature of the Congress led freedom movement, communism, and imperialism.”²⁴

Led by Haren Kalita, the *Vyayam Sangha* members joined the Communist League. A branch of the Communist League was set up in Assam with Haren Kalita as its secretary.

“Thus, the secret revolutionaries of colonial Brahmaputra Valley who have been chasing for long, a proper political ideology and revolutionary path saw a glimmer of light in the communist League.”²⁵

²² Tagore differed with the Comintern on the ‘Colonial Question’. Later, he came to favour Leon Trotsky’s theory of ‘Permanent Revolution’ over Joseph Stalin’s notion of ‘Socialism in One Country’. He also came to oppose the Comintern’s ‘Popular Front’ strategy in the 1930s, regarding it as a betrayal of the proletarian revolution. Source: Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tagore/index.htm>

²³ Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*.

²⁴ Deka, op.cit.p.26.

²⁵ ibid, p.27

Meanwhile, an underground organising committee of the Communist League and an open Marxist study circle called the 'Radical Institute' emerged in Guwahati.²⁶ Activists established another important Marxist study circle, the *Progressive Union*, at the same time. These two study circles played a crucial role in drawing a large section of students toward the broad front of 'Left nationalism'.²⁷ Communist leader Sudhamoi Dasgupta travelled from Kolkata to provide ideological expositions of Marxism to the members of the Radical Institute. Thus, reading Marxist literature helped spread communist thought more effectively among students and youths. This ideological framework transformed young militant revolutionaries into revolutionary communists with a coherent class-based ideology. Deka noted that they faced an acute shortage of funds to operate the study circle and tried every possible way to collect funds, even traveling to remote rural areas during festive occasions like Durga Puja. They organised cultural and musical shows to collect funds from the people. Gradually, Radical Institute gained popularity among students and youths of the Brahmaputra Valley and set up a strong base among the students at Cotton College.

"In 1938, Khagen Barbarua, a member of the Communist League and Radical Institute, was elected the General Secretary of the Cotton College Union Society. I got elected as the first year's class representative by a huge margin. For the next five years the union society was under our capture. After Barbarua, Phani Talukdar, Uma Sarma, Narayan Das etc., were elected." ²⁸

The *Vyayam Sangha* members and early revolutionary communists of the valley attempted to organise the peasants and workers of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Communist League spread its activities to all districts of Assam. On May 1, 1940, organisers formed an organisation called *Krikkhak-Banua Dal* with Prafulla Goswami serving as president and Upen Sarma as secretary. They later renamed it *Krikkhak-Banua Panchayat*. Haridas Deka became a member of its executive committee.²⁹ The Digboi oil workers' strike and several other workers' strikes instilled class consciousness among Assam's workers. The revolutionary communists tried to organise Guwahati's workers during this period. Since no large factories existed in Guwahati at that time, they had no opportunity to organise factory workers; therefore, they attempted to organise the individuals from marginalised castes, those who drove *Ekkagari* (carts), workers of the ferry and steamer service, and oil company and rice mill workers. The revolutionary communists celebrated May Day in Guwahati on May 1, 1939, organising

²⁶ SIB, File No: B2(3)(F)39, Assam State Archive, Dispur

²⁷ Guha, op.cit. p.206

²⁸ Deka, op.cit., p. 29

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 30

a huge procession followed by a workers' meeting and hoisting the red flag. 'Probably, this constituted the first May Day celebration in Assam,' as Deka noted in his autobiography.

On September 1, 1939, World War II began. As soon as the war started, the revolutionary communists began circulating an anti-war pamphlet called the 'Communist Istahar'. They printed and circulated it very secretly, utilising the 'Pioneer Printing Press' of the Muslim League in Guwahati. Through this pamphlet, they tried to mobilise public opinion against the imperialist war. The government declared this pamphlet illegal and frequently searched party workers' houses for the source of this pamphlet, but failed to trace it.

The police kept the revolutionaries under strict surveillance. Therefore, they secretly published pamphlets, set up gymnasiums, and established other youth and mass organisations, even utilising Congress platforms. Activists formed the *Sadao Asam Pragatibadi Jubak Sangha* (1939) to unite workers from both valleys. They invited Subhas Chandra Bose to preside over its opening session at Judges' Field. Bose had already resigned as President of the Tripuri Congress (1939) and declared his intention to follow his own distinctive path in achieving freedom for India. The young revolutionaries of the Communist League had already expanded their organisation to various districts of Assam, especially Kamrup district, South Goalpara, and Sibsagar. In other areas, they formed *Krikkhak Banua Panchayats*, and with their cooperation and under dynamic leadership, organisers began mobilising the valley's peasants. The organisation raised the key demand to provide land to landless peasants.

On 29 October 1941, thousands of farmers marched 18/20 miles with red flag from South Kamrup and North Kamrup to Guwahati and surrounded the DC's bungalow, shouting slogans for their land rights and against the imperialist war.³⁰

This constituted a significant peasants' rally in the Brahmaputra Valley. This peasant rally profoundly impacted the peasant and working class of the Brahmaputra Valley. Haridas Deka considers it the first organised peasants' rally in the Brahmaputra Valley. The revolutionaries vehemently opposed the war and publicly criticised the Sadulla Ministry's stance. For this act, authorities detained all key activists including Haridas Deka,³¹ Khagen Barbarua, Haren Kalita, Uma Sarma, Gakul Medhi, and Bhupen Mahanta in 1940 under the Defence of India Act, 1939.

On December 6, 1941, organisers launched an anti-imperialist student movement in Guwahati. The National War Front organised an exhibition at Judges' Field, Guwahati from December 5, 1941, to

³⁰ *ibid*, p.32

³¹ *ibid.*, p.32

raise funds for the war. They also held an exhibition in Cotton College's laboratory. A group of students led by Haren Kalita picketed the exhibition. Rajabala Das, the headmistress of Panbazar Girls' High School, along with a group of girl students, forcefully entered the exhibition, defying the picketers. This caused a stir among Guwahati's protesting students. The next day, all Cotton College students demanded that the principal withdraw the war exhibition held in the college's science laboratory. However, the Principal, the president of the governing council, and the Deputy Commissioner of Guwahati refused to concede the demand.

The DC came to the college, refused to withdraw the exhibition, and threatened the students. The situation escalated when police resorted to *lathi charge* to break the procession. About 60-70 students from Cotton College and other government schools suffered serious injuries. Police arrested Haren Kalita, Haridas Deka, Gokul Medhi, and Uma Sarma while they lay injured in the hospital for leading the protest. Authorities tried them inside the jail due to strong student protests outside. This movement can be regarded as the dress rehearsal of the Quit India Movement of 1942.³² This anti-war movement extended beyond students only. The movement reverberated on a wide scale throughout Assam, and people raised their voices through hartals, protest meetings, and processions against this inhuman *lathi-charge* and forcible collection of funds for the war. Workers extended their support to the students. After this incident, a large group of young revolutionaries joined the RCPI. Notable among them were Tarun Sen Deka, Kamini Sarma, Mohanlal Mukherjee, Nihar Mukherjee, and Hiranmoi Ganguli.³³ Haridas Deka pointed to one significant experience during his imprisonment. A security personnel named Sri Brahmadeu Misir discovered some books belonging to this group and secretly provided them to the prisoners. Thus, they established close contact with Misir, and later, he also joined RCPI.³⁴

In reaction to the government's inhuman response, Padmanath Kakati alias Baga Palowan,³⁵ then a *Vyayam Sangha* member and resident of Sualkuchi, marched with a group of activists to the DC's office in Guwahati. They took down the Union Jack flying in front of the office, trampled it, and broke the flagpole. Authorities arrested Kakati and sent him to jail for this action. While in jail, the student leaders of RCPI, who were already imprisoned, initiated him into the political ideology of radical communism, and he joined RCPI. After their release from jail, they resumed their revolutionary

³² *ibid*, p.34

³³ *ibid.*, P.35

³⁴ *ibid.*, P.35

³⁵ Padma Kakati, a famous wrestler of Assam and a revolutionary popularly known as *Boga Palowan*. He was trained in the gymnasium of Barpetiapara, Panbazar. His bravery as a *Vyayam Sangha* member against the British is still alive among the old folks of Sualkuchi, his home place.

activities in a more organised way under RCPI. They collected arms and prepared for radical communist revolution with their dual motives of achieving political and economic independence. The revolutionary communist party formed a secret branch to collect arms and funds, and it actively participated in the Quit India movement while continuing its underground activities. During the course of the movement, they led several major incidents of violence against colonial authorities—including the derailment of a train at the Lakua-Safrai rail line, which was led by Tanushyam Goswami, Doctor Ratna Mazumdar, and Haridas Deka.³⁶ These episodes staged by the revolutionary trend placed severe pressure on the colonial authority and became a threat.

The communist movement fundamentally transformed the framework and agenda of India's freedom struggle. Despite facing organizational limitations, it brought the issue of class exploitation to the forefront and demonstrated a militant and consistent anti-imperialist stance. This movement spread the politics of class struggle and the ideology of scientific socialism throughout the country through its various mass organizations. However, the movement drew its roots from the revolutionary trend of India's freedom struggle. Young revolutionaries found themselves attracted to the communist platform because of its strong ideological foundations and robust interpretation of colonialism. They sought independence not only from colonial rule but also from the social and economic exploitation perpetrated by different classes.

Colonial authorities faced resistance in the Brahmaputra Valley since the latter half of the 19th century. In the 1930s, secret activities and groups began operating, and fitness clubs and gymnasiums like *Vyayam Sangha* emerged as key organisations that employed multiple strategies ranging from social welfare work to underground revolutionary activities and the circulation of revolutionary papers to resist colonial rule. Though the organisation initially focused mainly on social welfare work, it later played a significant role in spreading revolutionary activities and founding the Revolutionary Communist Movement in Assam. The *Gauhati Vyayam Sangha's* transformation from a social welfare-oriented group to a revolutionary force exemplifies the growing discontent and determination of common people at the grassroots level to challenge colonial oppression. Their multifaceted approach—incorporating social welfare work, underground revolutionary activities, organising cultural shows, and publishing ideological literature—highlighted their efforts to build a support base among the masses. To understand the genesis of militant revolutionism in Assam, one must acknowledge the efforts and bravery of young revolutionaries like Rajen Kalita, Khargeswar Sarma, and several others, while also studying the subsequent developments of the radical communist movement in Assam post-1942. The

³⁶ op.cit., p.38

selfless efforts of these young revolutionaries significantly shaped the socio-political dynamics of the colonial Brahmaputra Valley and catalysed anti-colonial activism.

Conclusion

Haridas Dekas' autobiographical account promises to make a substantial contribution to the existing literature on India's communist movement by providing an intimate, grassroots perspective on revolutionary activities in Assam. His personal narrative fills a crucial gap in the documentation of regional communist movements, offering insights into the lived experiences of activists who operated in the periphery of mainstream political discourse. Through his firsthand account, Daka illuminates the everyday struggles, ideological formations, and organisational challenges faced by communist revolutionaries in colonial Assam, thereby enriching our understanding of how national movements manifested at the local level.

The autobiographical nature of Deka's work adds authenticity to the historical record, capturing not just the political events but also the human dimensions of revolutionary commitment. His account will likely reveal the intricate networks of support, the role of cultural organisations like *Vyayam Sangha* in political mobilisation, and the ways in which communist ideology adapted to local conditions and concerns. By documenting the transition from social welfare activities to armed resistance, Deka's memoir provides valuable insights into the evolution of revolutionary consciousness and the factors that drove ordinary individuals toward radical politics. Furthermore, Daka's narrative contributes to the decolonisation of communist movement historiography by centring regional voices and experiences that have often been marginalised in favour of more prominent national leaders and urban centres. His work ensures that the contributions of Assamese revolutionaries receive due recognition in the broader narrative of India's struggle for independence and social justice. This autobiographical account will serve as an essential primary source for future scholars studying the intersection of regional identity, class consciousness, and anti-colonial resistance, thereby expanding and enriching the corpus of communist movement literature in India.

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