



*Lokapriya
Gopinath
Bordoloi*



**LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI
OCTOBER 2002**

LOKAPRIYA
GOPINATH BORDOLOI

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PREFACE

Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi was a visionary leader. The saga of his multifaceted life epitomizes unwavering dedication, rare spirit of sacrifice, rocklike resolve to fight injustice in all its forms, closeness to people and humility in his disposition. *Lokapriya*, as he is known among his admirers, belongs to that galaxy of stalwarts who played momentous role in shaping the destiny of Assam and who personified the remarkable cultural ethos and native aspirations of the Assamese people. His indelible achievement lies in the decisive role he played on the eve of Independence when he strongly opposed the 'Grouping Scheme' and ensured merger of Assam with India.

A grateful nation honours the memory of *Lokapriya* Gopinath Bordoloi on 1 October, 2002 when the Hon'ble President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, will unveil the *Lokapriya's* statue in the Parliament House. The initiative for installing the statue came from the General Purposes Committee of the Lok Sabha.

The statue of *Lokapriya* Gopinath Bordoloi, sculpted by the eminent sculptor, Shri Pranabendu B. Dhar, and made of bronze, is 8 feet and 11 inches in height, having a pedestal of 9 inches. The statue has been donated by the Government of Assam.

To mark the occasion, the Lok Sabha Secretariat is bringing out this publication which contains *Lokapriya* Gopinath Bordoloi's brief bio-profile, his views on various aspects of our national life and some select photographs. An exhibition on the life and times of the *Lokapriya* is also being organised by the Parliamentary Museum and Archives of the Lok Sabha Secretariat.

We are grateful to the Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha, Shri Manohar Joshi, for his keen interest and valuable guidance in organizing the function. We are also grateful to the Government of Assam for donating the statue.

This publication is a humble tribute to the memory of *Lokapriya* Gopinath Bordoloi. We hope it will be found useful and informative by all.

NEW DELHI;
1 October, 2002

G.C. MALHOTRA,
Secretary-General,
Lok Sabha.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	(i)
LOKAPRIYA GOPINATH BORDOLOI—A Profile	(v)
Early Years	1
Bordoloi's Role in the Freedom Struggle	2
Making of a Leader	3
Difficult Years	5
Opposition to the Grouping Plan	7
A Progressive Administrator	8
A True Gandhian	9
As an Educationist	9
Bordoloi and Hill Autonomy	10
Other Dimensions	11
Death and Tributes	11
A PICTORIAL TRIBUTE	13

LOKAPRIYA
GOPINATH BORDOLOI
- A Profile

An illustrious visionary, a firm believer in the principles of secularism and a selfless and dedicated worker for the cause of Assamese culture and identity, Gopinath Bordoloi was a charismatic leader with sterling qualities of head and heart. Popularly known as Lokapriya, he nourished the dream of a progressive and modern Assam and ceaselessly endeavoured to fulfil it. As the Prime Minister of Assam, he displayed unparalleled qualities of statesmanship and farsightedness. At the time of partition, it was Gopinath Bordoloi's understanding of the wishes of the Assamese people, his firm resolve and leadership that accounted significantly in Assam's integration with India and Assam's statehood.

Early Years

Born on 6 June 1890 at Raha in Nagaon District, Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi lost his mother, Praneswari Devi, when he was quite young. His father, Budheswar Bordoloi, was a doctor in Government service. After the death of his mother, Gopinath Bordoloi was brought up by his widowed sister, Shashikala Devi. The Bordolois belonged to the Brahmin *Daiyajna* caste and their family was an enlightened one and originally came from Uttar Pradesh. After completing Matriculation and Intermediate in Arts in Guwahati, he left for Calcutta for higher studies in 1909. In Calcutta, he joined the Scottish Church College where he completed his B.A. (Honours) in History in 1911. Thereafter, having completed his post-graduation in History and the three-year course in Law, he returned to Guwahati and joined the Guwahati Bar in 1917. The legal profession provided him a measure of personal freedom he needed in order to take part in public affairs.

In 1917, he married Surbala, the only daughter of Bhumikanta Majinder Barua. Gopinath Bordoloi gave her training in cooking, and, sewing work and helped her in learning Hindi. During his stay in jail, Surbala would prepare Bordoloi's dhoti and kurta from hand-spun yarn. Significantly, she also sent hand-woven

clothes for Bordoloi's distinguished colleagues like Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed who later on rose to become the President of India.

Gopinath Bordoloi was very fond of sports and music. He himself sang *Bargeet*, the serene Assamese Vaisnavite hymns, Brahma-sangeet, Rabindra sangeet and Assamese Bihu songs. Simultaneously, he also nurtured a poet in himself allowing him to be kind-hearted and compassionate. His letters from jail to his wife and children echoed his feeling of compassion in which he would advise them to accept a life of purity and simplicity and serve humanity in a better way.

Bordoloi's Role in the Freedom Struggle

The organisations like the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha and the Assam Association provided a qualitative leap to the freedom struggle in Assam. These two organisations were the mouthpieces of the nascent Assamese middle class. The Assam Association, in fact, provided a broad platform for all sections of the educated middle class—writers, lawyers, social workers, educationists and politicians.

Gopinath Bordoloi was a practising lawyer in Guwahati when Gandhiji came to the city in August 1921. Being a member of the Assam Association, he was also aware of the political and social problems of the country. But he was playing second fiddle to the trio—Tarun Ram Phookan, Naba Chandra Bordoloi and Kuladher Chaliha. Soon the Non-cooperation Movement surfaced in Assam also. In 1921, Gopinath Bordoloi suspended his legal practice and took to organisational work and soon became the Joint Secretary of the Guwahati Congress Committee. After Phookan's arrest on 30 November, 1921, he became more active and visited villages to promote ideas of *Khadi* and *Swadeshi*.

Tarun Ram Phookan is known as the mentor of Gopinath Bordoloi. He was a leader of eminence and possessed unusual fearlessness and commonsense coupled with traits of imaginative leadership. Gopinath Bordoloi acknowledged later that for the first time he learnt from Phookan, a clear exposition of the idea of mass civil disobedience. Gradually, like his mentor, Gopinath Bordoloi was also initiated into Gandhism.

He met Gandhiji during the Ahmedabad Session of the Indian National Congress in December 1921. He was mesmerized with the way the Khadi work was being carried out in Gujarat and soon realized that Khadi was the key to the revival of Assam's rural economy. Soon after return from Ahmedabad, he was arrested and whisked away to the Tezpur Jail. This was his first imprisonment, which lasted for a full term of one year. The jail term changed his way of life and he emerged mentally stronger and well equipped to fight the imperialistic powers and communal elements.

Subsequent to formation of a separate group of Swarajists within the Indian National Congress after the Gaya Session in 1922, Tarun Ram Phookan and Gopinath Bordoloi offered their full support to the newly formed Swaraj Party and soon formed a State Unit in Assam, which recorded significant success in elections. Gopinath Bordoloi who was the President, Guwahati District Congress Committee, also actively campaigned and addressed several meetings in support of its members. In 1929, the Congress passed a resolution, popularly known as the Lahore Resolution, voicing its support for Non-cooperation. Phookan and Bordoloi, however, did not agree with this approach and issued a joint statement expressing their reservations about the Assembly boycott programme and questioned its relevance in Assam. Bordoloi felt that the presence of the Congress representatives was necessary in the Assembly to oppose repressive and anti-people policies of the Government. Ultimately, he resigned from the Presidentship of the Guwahati District Congress Committee on 27 February 1930. Within a decade, the relevance of this stand was proved and even Gandhiji later on supported it.

Making of a Leader

After Bordoloi's resignation as the President of the Guwahati District Congress Committee, Tarun Ram Phookan revived the Swaraj Party. Soon Phookan was re-elected to the Central Legislature. The All India Congress Committee (AICC), in retaliation, asked him to resign from the AICC and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC). Both Phookan and Bordoloi

not only complied with the directive but also went a step further by resigning from the primary membership of the Congress. Though Bordoloi did not participate in the 1930-33 movements, he, however, never disassociated himself from the activities going on at the national and State levels. Evidently, he had some justification for keeping aloof from the Congress mainstream. He was actually a great believer in parliamentary politics and believed that unless some of them were in the Assembly, the special problems of Assam could not be tackled.

In 1934, Gandhiji, who had come to Assam on his Harijan mission, visited a Harijan colony with Bordoloi. The visit enabled him to realize the wretched conditions in which Harijans lived. Later as the Chairman of the Guwahati Municipality, Bordoloi took several measures to ameliorate their conditions. He was also instrumental in promoting the Rastra Bhasa Prachar Samiti in Assam. As Chairman of the Samiti, he, along with his other colleagues, laid the foundation of popular Hindi education in the province. He was of the opinion that propagation of Hindi in Assam would allow the Assamese people to integrate themselves with the national mainstream.

Bordoloi returned to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937 and was elected the leader of the Indian National Congress in the Assembly. The Legislature Party, however, did not make any attempt to form the government as the party at the national level was in favour of non-acceptance of office. However, the Congress soon changed its decision and favoured acceptance of the Ministry at the provincial level, in provinces where the party was in majority. In the Assam Assembly, Sir Mohammad Saadullah was the Prime Minister of Assam and Bordoloi was the Leader of the Opposition. The Governor of Assam preferred Sir Saadullah because of his close rapport with the European group in the Assembly. The Saadullah Ministry had taken office on 1 April 1937.

In view of a large number of defeats on the floor of the House and extremely hostile policies of his government, protests against the Saadullah Ministry grew with each passing day. Faced with the prospects of defeat, the Saadullah Ministry resigned on

13 September 1938. Bordoloi called on the Governor on 18 September 1938 and submitted a list of five Ministers. Ultimately on September 20, 1938 the Bordoloi Ministry was sworn in.

Difficult Years

During his tenure as the Prime Minister of Assam for fourteen months, Bordoloi proved to be an able administrator and a popular politician. His government was secular with a democratic outlook and a deep-rooted commitment to the welfare of the people. His government passed an enactment on prohibition of the opium trade. The Finance Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, introduced the Agricultural Income Tax Bill and got it passed. This move envisaged a tax on the profits of the tea industry, which mainly hurt the interests of European traders. Bordoloi also pursued the policy of protecting the grazing reserves and reserved forests in order to preserve the valuable forest resources of the province. His Cabinet instituted a Tea Labour Conditions Enquiry Committee to investigate into the working conditions in the Assam tea gardens. Despite all these progressive policies, the Bordoloi Cabinet had to resign following the directive of the Congress Working Committee in October 1939 in protest against the arbitrary action of the British Government in declaring India as one of the belligerent countries without her consent. In spite of the fact that Sir Saadullah did not have the requisite majority, the Government quickly saddled him in power.

Bordoloi again met Gandhiji in Wardha on 26 November 1940. Gandhiji asked Assam legislators to choose between working in the Legislature and offering *Satyagraha*. Bordoloi was quick to choose the latter and soon offered *Satyagraha* at the Deputy Commissioner's Court in Guwahati before a crowd of 10,000 people, including students and youths. The Government took a serious note of this development. Bordoloi was arrested and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. In jail, he developed some serious health complications and the Government was forced to release him on health ground on 18 June 1941.

After his release from jail, Bordoloi went to Wardha to discuss with Gandhiji some of the burning problems arising out of Sir Saadullah's policy of opening of the reserve forests to immigrants. He told Gandhiji that there was persistent demand in the State to resume parliamentary activities by the Congress to oppose Sir Saadullah's objectionable policies. Gandhiji agreed with him allowing Assam legislators to attend the Winter Session of the Assembly. The Congress Legislature Party soon forced the Saadullah Ministry to resign on 12 December 1941. The Governor took the administration of the province in his own hands under section 93 of the Government of India Act.

In the meantime, the war situation worsened for the Allies. The administration in Assam became panicky and started mobilising the public support in favour of the war. The controversial Land Development Scheme initiated by the Saadullah Ministry was scrapped. The British Government also sent Sir Stafford Cripps to arrive at a political understanding with the Indian people. The Cripps Mission, however, failed to achieve its aim. Bordoloi along with other Congress leaders, meanwhile, formed *santi senas* for helping and serving the war evacuees from Burma and Malaya who had poured into Assam in the most wretched conditions.

In pursuance of the Wardha Resolution of 6 July 1942, the AICC passed its famous 'Quit India' resolution in Bombay on 8 August 1942. The British Government took a serious note of this development and soon arrested all prominent leaders of the Congress. The Congress and its associate bodies were declared illegal. Gopinath Bordoloi who had attended the Bombay Session, was also arrested at Dhubri in Assam. He was taken to the Jorhat jail. During this jail term, he suffered from multiple diseases and spent most of his time reading and writing. Some of his writings in jail were later published in the form of books. The Government was again forced to release him on health ground on 26 January 1944.

Immediately after the arrest of Congress MLAs, the Government of Assam called Sir Saadullah back to power and the new Ministry was installed on August 25, 1942. Bordoloi was feeling that both the imperialists and the Saadullah Government

were acting concertedly to suppress the secular democratic forces. On the other hand, the communal elements were trying hard to enforce the partition of the country the basis of religion.

By March 1945, the Congress was able to consolidate its position in the Assembly. As the Saadullah Ministry was facing acute dissension within the party, Sir Saadullah was forced to enter into a pact with Bordoloi, which was opposed by a number of Congressmen. Bordoloi, however, approached Gandhiji through his emissary M.M. Choudhury and got a positive response in this regard. The Saadullah Ministry resigned on 23 March 1945 only to resume office again with the Congress support. The ban on the Assam Congress was also lifted by the Government on 31 May 1945.

Simultaneously, the political situation in the United Kingdom also changed dramatically with the arrival of the Labour Party in power. The new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was in favour of solving the deadlock through sincere political means. His government soon made an earnest effort in this direction by releasing political prisoners and announcing general election in 1946. The Assam Congress registered an impressive success in the election by winning 58 seats in the House of 108. Bordoloi's Ministry assumed office in Shillong on 11 February 1946.

Opposition to the Grouping Plan

The Cabinet Mission was directed by the British Government to explore the possibility of drafting a Constitution for India in consultation with the Viceroy and Indian political leadership. According to the plan prepared by the Cabinet Mission, the Union of India was to consist of both the British India and the Indian States. It arbitrarily divided the British India into three groups under the 'Grouping Scheme'. Assam and Bengal were to be in Group C. On 1 April 1946, Bordoloi met the Cabinet Mission and strongly advocated for retaining Assam as a province and not to include it in Group C. According to him, Assam was already a province on the linguistic and cultural basis. He favoured separation of Sylhet from Assam and rejected the demand of Pakistan as absolutely preposterous.

Soon, there began a mass struggle in Assam to quash the 'Grouping Scheme'. The Assam Assembly adopted a resolution moved by Prime Minister Gopinath Bordoloi on 16 July 1946 in which it expressed strong disapproval of the 'Grouping Plan' and directed the ten representatives of Assam in the Constituent Assembly not to sit in section with any other province for devising the Constitution of Assam, or any group Constitution with such other province for settlement of any question relating to Assam.

The strong protest voiced by Gopinath Bordoloi was based on genuine reasons. It was clear that this merger with Bengal would seal the future of the Assamese people and Assam would lose its identity and individuality in the political whirlpool. In spite of Bordoloi's repeated requests, the Congress Working Committee took its time in providing direction to its Assam Unit on this vital issue. In December 1946, Bordoloi sent Bijoya Chandra Bhagavati and M.M.Choudhury to meet Gandhiji to seek his advice on this issue. With Gandhiji's blessings, Bordoloi succeeded in convincing other national leaders about the justness of Assam's case and getting the concerned parts of the Cabinet Mission's plan scrapped.

In this unique battle for survival, Gopinath Bordoloi emerged as a towering personality in entire India. Had he not opposed the 'Grouping Scheme', there would have been no Assam left. In other words, he saved Assam from getting into Pakistan by his heroic leadership and on 15 August 1947, Assam emerged as an integral part of the Dominion of India. Gopinath Bordoloi's immense contribution to the national unity, his patriotic zeal, and selfless service to the people were acknowledged by the grateful nation in 1999 when he was awarded *Bharat Ratna* posthumously.

A Progressive Administrator

After Independence, Gopinath Bordoloi continued as the Prime Minister of Assam until his death on 5 August 1950. He had very little time for making Assam an industrially strong State. In 1948, the Bordoloi Cabinet passed its industrial policy, which outlined the industrialization programme for Assam. He made it clear that the rights of management of industries would be in the hands of the people of Assam. For this, he envisaged a programme of training local youths in management and technical education.

He was instrumental in getting the Guwahati University Bill, 1947 passed in the Assembly. From 1 January 1948, the Guwahati University started functioning. Besides, he also took initiative for establishing medical and engineering colleges. He also took various commendable steps for promotion of Hindi and for the welfare of tribal people. During Gopinath Bordoloi reign as the Prime Minister of Assam, the Guwahati High Court was also established in 1948.

A True Gandhian

Gopinath Bordoloi was a socialist of the Gandhian type and wanted an egalitarian society based on justice and fair play. His contribution to the propagation and practice of Gandhian ideals was noteworthy. His meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1921 changed him totally and he plunged headlong into the constructive programmes aimed at the welfare of the downtrodden. In order to carry the message of Gandhiji and his effective weapon *Khadi* to the masses, he travelled throughout Assam on foot and founded many *Khadi* centres through which production and sale of *Khadi* was promoted. One of his favourite missions was to propagate Hindi and as Chairman, Assam Rastra Bhasa Samiti, he implemented various schemes in Assam. Inspired by Gandhiji's, desire to work for the uplift of Harijans, he worked with dedication in the All India *Harijan Sevak Sangh*. He arranged community dinners for Harijans, led volunteers to Harijan hamlets and cleaned their roads, etc. to raise the status of Harijans. Bordoloi's another work was to eradicate the evil of alcohol drinking. He also paid special attention to the literacy programmes. All these efforts show that he was a true Gandhian.

As an Educationist

Gopinath Bordoloi played an important role in reforming the educational scene in Assam. He was instrumental in establishing the Kamrup Akademy and the D. Borooah College in Guwahati. He was immensely interested in improving higher education and his passion for this culminated in the establishment of the Guwahati University in 1948.

Again it was due to his efforts that the Assam Agricultural College, the Assam Medical College, the Assam Veterinary College and other technical institutions came into existence in the State. He also tried to popularise the basic education by expanding the facilities in the remoter parts of the province. According to him, education was a pre-requisite for the successful operation of democracy as it allowed people to appreciate the value of civil liberties and corresponding duties of the citizens. He was of the opinion that if educational institutions lacked democratic spirit, it would definitely undermine democratic ideals and norms.

Bordoloi and Hill Autonomy

Bordoloi was concerned with the question of preserving ways of life and culture and language of tribal people. When the modalities of transfer of power by the British were being discussed in the late 1940s, the Cabinet Mission raised the issue of giving special attention to the problems of tribal and excluded areas. As a follow up of this, the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, Tribal and Excluded Areas set up two sub-committees—one on North East Frontier Tribal Areas and Assam Excluded and partially Excluded Areas, with Gopinath Bordoloi as Chairman and the other on Excluded and partially Excluded Areas in provinces other than Assam with A.V. Thakkar as Chairman.

Bordoloi believed that the tribal people needed suitable provisions to save them from exploitation and to prevent encroachment of hilly areas by people from the plains. To ensure this, he suggested the establishment of Autonomous District Councils for the tribal groups in the south bank of Brahmaputra bordering Burma and former Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This arrangement, he thought, would dispel the feeling of separatism and isolation among them. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was drawn up to empower the Autonomous District Councils in matters relating to occupation or use of land, management of forests, use of water course, regulation of the practice of *jhum*, establishment of the town or village committees, inheritance of property, etc. As a member of the Constituent Assembly, Bordoloi's

immense sensitivity towards the welfare of the tribal people was greatly responsible for insertion of these arrangements in the Constitution.

Other Dimensions

Gopinath Bordoloi was a man of versatile genius. While serving his jail term at Jorhat, he kept himself busy in reading and writing. He wrote six books for children for which he selected characters like Rama, Buddha, Jesus Christ and Mohammed and this choice reflected his belief in the diversity of the Assamese society. Apart from writing the biography of his mentor, Tarun Ram Phookan, he also translated Gandhiji's 'Anasakti Yoga' in the Assamese.

One of the qualities of Bordoloi was his love for music. His love for children was a marvelous trait of his character. He would call them to his courtyard and teach them how to sing to the accompaniment of the organ which he played himself.

Suave, elegant and handsome, Bordoloi was simple in his dress and always wore *Khadi*. Beneath his rough exterior, there was the softness of humility. He was a religious person and his deep faith in God and prophets made him a humble but determined person. The ethical basis of life, he believed, was God and he always highlighted this point in his letters to his children.

Death and Tributes

Gopinath Bordoloi died of heart attack on 5 August 1950, at the age of 60. He belongs to that band of outstanding Indians whom the nation will always remember with respect and gratitude. Rich tributes were paid to him on his demise.

Appreciating his qualities and contribution to the nation, the then President, Shri Rajendra Prasad, said :

By his (Bordoloi's) death a void is created in public life in Assam and India which will be very difficult to fill.... Shri Bordoloi had borne the burden of administering a most difficult province in very trying times. He was greatly loved

and respected not only in Assam but outside the province, as a great fighter in the cause of freedom and good and considerate administrator.

Paying his tributes, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister said :

The passing away of Shri Gopinath Bordoloi, a relatively young person in full harness and bearing on his broad shoulders the responsibility of one of the most difficult States in India, is a very severe blow to us—not only to his State of Assam but to all of us in this country.

Shri G. V. Mavalankar, the then Speaker, Lok Sabha, paid his rich tributes to this charismatic leader in the following words :

He died at a very young age and at a time when his services and guidance were very useful and needed by us in connection with the present situation.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, paid his tributes to the departed soul in the following words :

It is difficult to think of the State of Assam without Gopinath Bordoloi. He had identified himself so completely with the interest of his State, and for years the political life had so much intermingled with his great personality that we had come to think of the two entities being always synonymous.

A PICTORIAL TRIBUTE



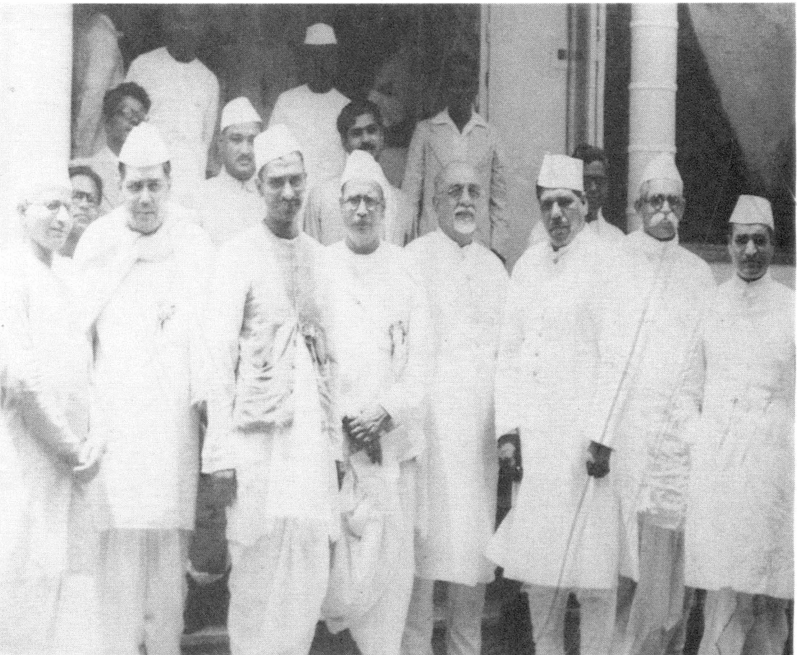
Lokpariya Gopinath Bordoloi



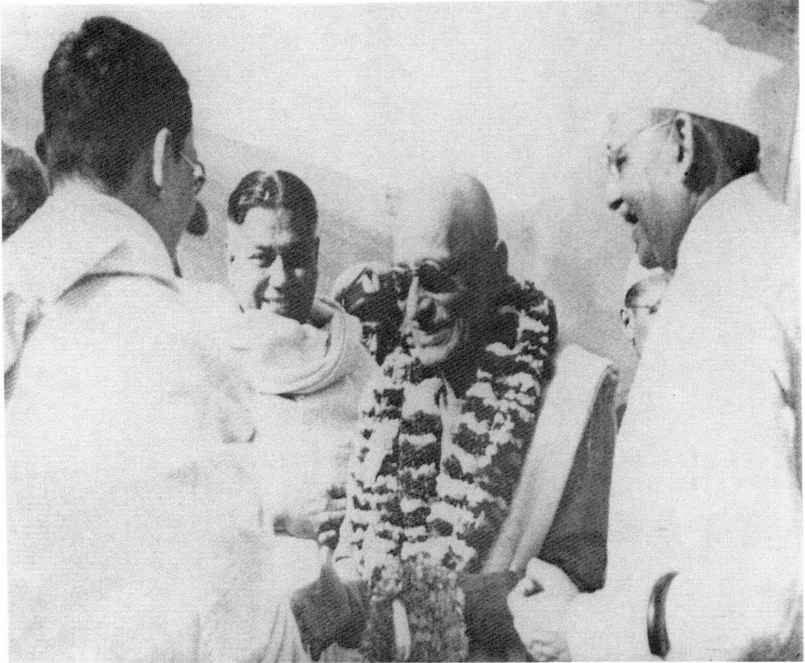
Gopinath Bordoloi in his youth



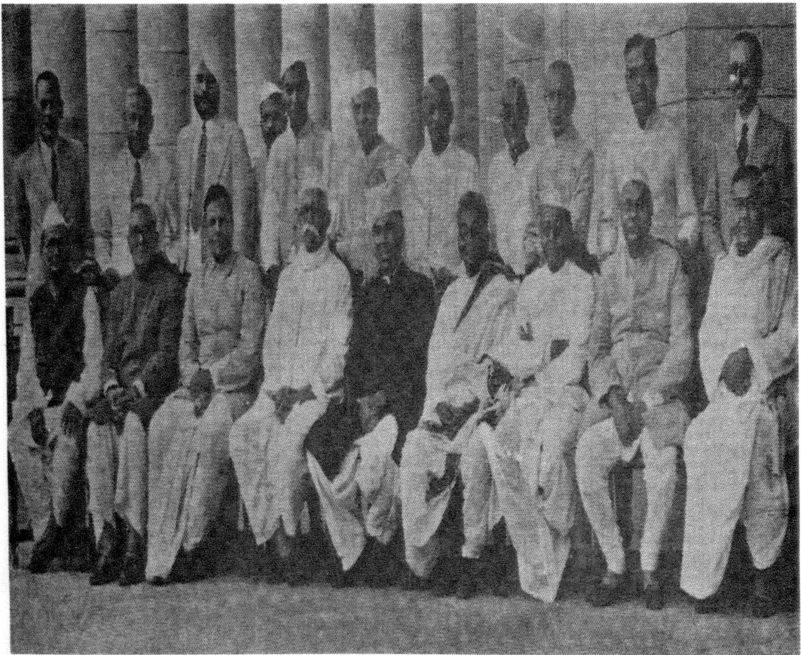
Gopinath Bordoloi with Gandhiji in Assam



Gopinath Bordoloi with his colleagues



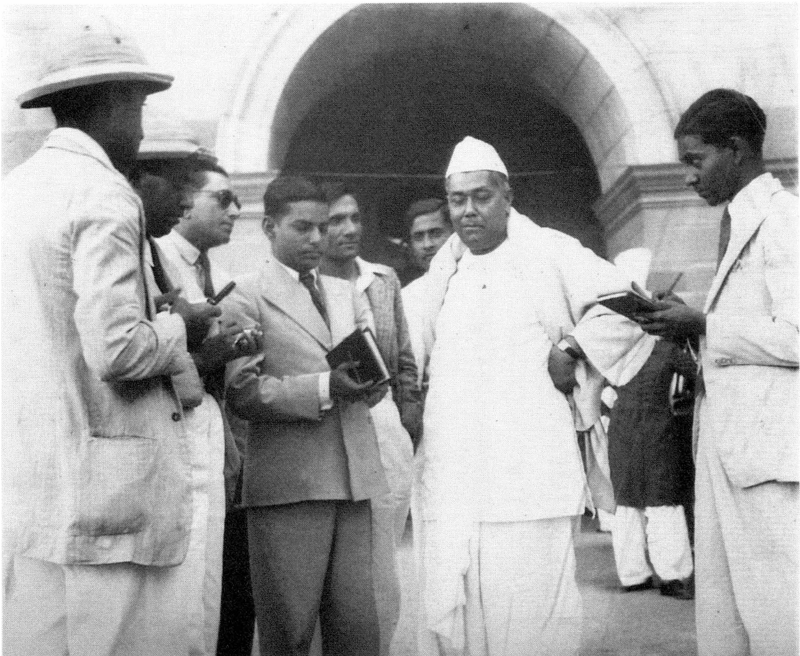
Gopinath Bordoloi with C. Rajagopalachari, Sri Prakasa and Others



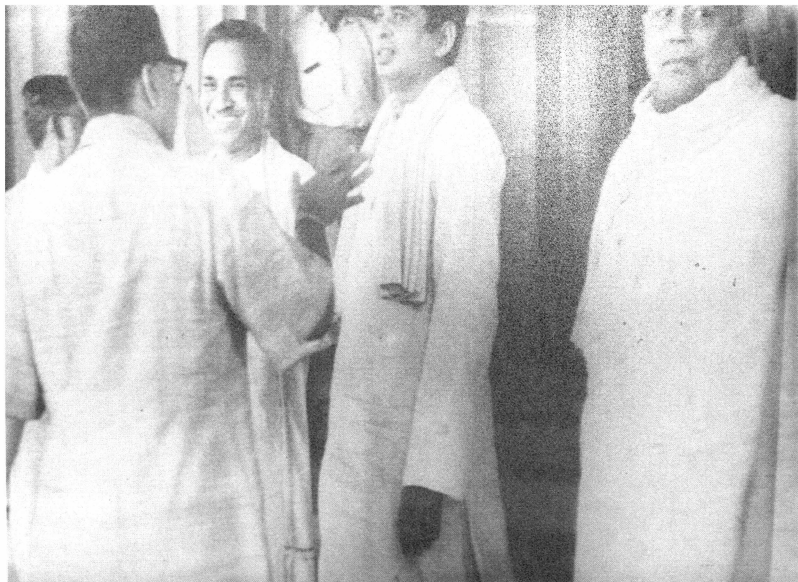
Gopinath Bordoloi in a group photograph



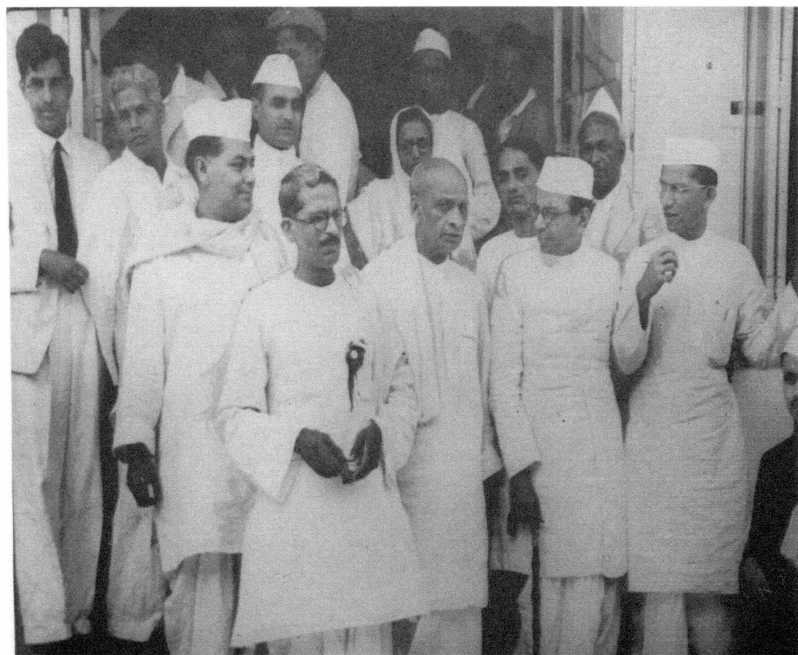
Gopinath Bordoloi with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose



Gopinath Bordoloi with Pressmen after his meeting with
the British Cabinet Mission



Gopinath Bordoloi with the members of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly



Gopinath Bordoloi with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel



Gopinath Bordoloi addressing a meeting



Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi at eternal rest