

Role of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Other Marwaris in the National Movement of Assam, 1930 to 1943

Ashok Barman

Ph.D. Research Scholar in History, Rabindra Bharati University

Abstract: *The anti-colonial movement in India significantly impacted Assam's valleys, particularly after the popular phase of Gandhi-led civil disobedience began in 1920. Inspired by the Congress-led movement, Indians across the country, including Assam, rose against colonial rule. Various forms of resistance emerged in Assam, such as refusal to pay revenue, opposition to tea planters, defiance of landlords (zamindars), and resistance against colonial forestry programs. Notably, even the Marwari community, known for their reluctance to engage in political movements, actively participated in these resistances. This paper explores the involvement of the Marwari community in Assam's nationalist movement from the pre-Civil Disobedience era to the post-1942 period. While the Marwaris were primarily focused on business and controlled Assam's commerce and internal trade, many individuals within the community played significant roles in the national movement. The Marwaris' involvement in Assam's nationalist movement extended beyond individual contributions. They also played a crucial role in providing financial support to the movement. Many Marwari businessmen donated generously to various nationalist causes, helping to sustain the movement's activities. Their participation in the anti-colonial struggle demonstrates the Marwaris' commitment to their adopted homeland and their willingness to contribute to the cause of Indian independence, challenging the perception of their reluctance to engage in political movements.*

Keywords: National Movement of Assam, Marwaris, Civil Disobedience Movement, 1942 movement, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

The anti-colonial struggle in India had a significant impact on Assam's valleys during the period at least since the popular phase of the Gandhi-led movement began in 1920. Inspired by this movement led by the Congress, the Indians rose against the Colonial subjugation. Assam did not remain untouched by this. In Assam, various forms of resistance were put up which fall under the rubric of "nationalist" resistance. These resistances included the refusal to pay revenue, opposition against tea planters, defiance of the zamindars (landlords), and resistance against the colonial forestry program.

In this, we find the involvement of the Marwaris, who are generally considered very reluctant to get into any political movement. This paper is an attempt to discuss the Marwaris' involvement from the pre-Civil Disobedience days to the post-1942 days.

The Marwaris displayed a strong inclination towards business and they controlled the commerce and internal trade of Assam. But in this community, many people played significant roles in the national movement. The growth of Assamese nationalism can be traced to the establishment of 'Assam Association in 1903. The Association served as the mouthpiece of the Assamese middle class in articulating their needs, grievances and aspirations. The Association was instrumental in organizing the new generation to fight against the Britishers. The first student organization of the valley 'Assam Chatra Sanmilan' came into existence in 1916, and L.N. Bezbarua was chosen as the president. Soon after the 'Assam Sahitya Sabha' was established in 1917 it can be said that the phase of mass nationalism in Assam had begun. Many leading Marwaris were also involved in this process. A prominent member of the famous Marwari family of Assam Haribilash Agarwala founded the Axomiya Club at Tezpur in 1915 and its objectives were to create a centre of art, culture, and social service.¹ This, however, did not remain confined to cultural activities. Several leading Marwari leaders such as Shreejukta Molma Agarwala, Shri Haribilas Agarwala, Shri Gopal Chandra Agarwala and Shri Dhirendranath Agarwala were also involved with this organization.²

During Non-Cooperation Movement days the movement against the Britishers was intensified. The formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) took place in the district of Kamrup Metropolitan in Assam in the year 1921. In June 1921, when the Assam Provincial Congress Committee was formed, the prime impetus was given to Congress's idea of division on a linguistic basis for better coordination. The president of its ad hoc committee at the time of its formation was Kuladhar Chaliha. The prominent leaders who contributed to the formation of APCC were Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Maulana Tayebullah, Bishnuram Medhi, Siddharth Sharma, Gopal Chandra Agarwala and others.³ During Gandhi's first visit to Assam in 1921, the Non-Cooperation Movement started and Gandhi was accompanied by Chandra Kumar Agarwala from Tezpur.⁴ Chandra Kumar was moved by Gandhi's simplicity, humility, and philosophy and he got converted to Gandhism and began wearing Khadi. Inspired by Gandhi his perspective was broadened; now, he was thinking in terms of the nation rather than his region.

In the Golaghat subdivision of the Sibsagar district, an important centre for the political activities of Congress, two leading Marwari leaders were Kushal Konwar and Gojanand Jain. In those days following the Gandhian policy, the local Congressmen had been following the policy of non-cooperation with the British in the social, political, economic, and educational spheres. Foreign goods were being boycotted. To participate in the movement, students dropped out of college and school. Kushal Konwar

left his school in 1921.⁵ Jyoti Prasad Agarwala⁶ also emerged as a prominent Congress young leader in this phase. He is said to have met Krishna Menon, and Jyoti Prasad, who had experience in the liberation struggle, could have joined the India League in London.⁷ Because he is said to have met Krishna Menon, Jyoti Prasad, who had experience in the liberation struggle, could easily have joined the India League in London if his fate had not taken him to Scotland's Edinburgh University. Jyoti Prasad acquired preliminary admission to the Master of Arts (M.A.) programme at Edinburgh University towards the end of 1926. His areas of study were public law, economics, and culture. He could not complete the course, and he started taking an interest in the growth of cinema as a powerful medium of popular entertainment. Jyoti Prasad travelled the world, visiting various locations and gathering valuable experience. This exposure brought him closer to the national movement.⁸

Jyoti Prasad came from Karachi to Assam in 1930. He tried strengthening the grassroots organization in Assam. In the villages, he started to gather Seva Dal volunteers. The core of these volunteer groups was made up of women, young people, and farmers (ryots). He organized training camps while walking across the villages. His presence attracted more people. He used to lead processions as they travelled from village to village, preaching the message of independence, and his revolutionary songs helped the masses rediscover their sense of freedom. He once led 500 members of the Seva Dal from Kolongpur to a Ryot Sabha at Biswanath. To avoid being caught, the members of the group trekked the whole 60 kilometres during the night. By doing this, he established a grassroots movement on the Assamese north bank, and his revolutionary songs became the region's anthem for the liberation struggle. All of these actions were being watched by the administration, which was especially concerned about the growing number of women joining the movement. The then-Chief Secretary of Assam stated in a secret report that the growing number of women participating—which was unthinkable only a year ago—is becoming a 'cause of serious concern'.⁹

Some people were critical of Gandhi's nonviolent satyagraha technique for obtaining liberation after the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and the death of Chandrashekar Azad at the end of March 1931. There were disagreements even among the Congressmen. There was a segment that supported militancy, and militant pamphlets began to be distributed. The leaflets supporting the views of militants were circulated in Assam. Jyoti Prasad remained against violence.¹⁰ The Assamese government's Home Department stated at the time that Jyoti Prasad had instructed the volunteers at a Youth League meeting in April 1931 to draw inspiration from the ultimate sacrifice made by Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Azad, but he advised them not to follow the path of violence to attain the independence. Jyoti Prasad took part in a Seva Dal training programme at Nowgong in central Assam towards the end of 1931. In this camp, Dr. N. S. Hardikar, the All India Seva Dal board's chairman, trained fifty members of the Seva

Dal. He also set up a Seva Dal training camp at Nikamul Xatra in Tezpur to have the volunteers ready to raise the tricolour on January 26. He travelled the district in the interim to recruit volunteers for the flag-hoisting ceremony. Amiya Kumar Das hoisted the tricolour at Polo Field, Tezpur, at first light on January 26, 1932. From there, Jyoti Prasad conducted a march while singing patriotic songs down the town's main street.¹¹

Gandhi had been imprisoned while the Second Round Table Conference was ineffective. All Congress organizations were declared unlawful and outlawed in February 1932. Repressive police actions were undertaken. Leaders like Sardar Patel, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, and Jawaharlal Nehru were imprisoned. The government in Assam took extreme measures against Congressmen. Congress Party offices were demolished. To conduct an investigation Motilal Nehru, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad travelled to Guwahati. Jyoti Prasad was the target of a manhunt by the police. Jyoti Prasad escaped the police by disguising himself as a lady and travelling to Bholaguri T.E. in a bullock cart. He was detained later and he was sentenced to fifteen months of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs 500.¹²

During his ten-day visit to Assam, Mahatma Gandhi arrived at Golaghat on April 15, 1934. People travelled from all around to witness the great leader, so much so that in those days it seemed as though all roads went to Golaghat. During that period, young Congress workers such as Kushal Konwar, Bhadra Phukan, Tilak Bora, and others were tasked with assisting Gandhi. When Kushal Konwar first saw Gandhi, he was overcome with a sense of holiness. He touched the Mahatma's feet and asked for his blessings. For the young Kushal Konwar, this meeting was a life-changing event that left a lasting impression. Kushal Konwar's longing for freedom became stronger when he became close to Gandhiji, and on June 30, 1936, he resigned from his position working in the tea garden to actively pursue the path Gandhiji had laid out. By the time Kushal Konwar was about thirty-one, he had already given up salt and non-vegetarian food and was reciting the Gita and Bhagawat regularly. After quitting his work, he started participating even more in the freedom movement's activities and went about promoting independence across the communities. The creation of regional and *mouza*-wise rayat forums was one of the main objectives of the independence struggle. Kushal Konwar founded a Rayat Forum (a peasant organization) at Sarupathar. His organizational skills, mental toughness, and ability to work continuously gained him the hearts of the people. Following the Sarupathar Rayat Forum's achievement, Konwar's standing in Congress circles increased, and he was acknowledged as a prominent member of the Golaghat district Congress Committee. Meanwhile, Kushal Konwar moved to Sukia Pathar with his wife and three kids following the demise of his father. Konwar turned the Sarupathar Congress office into a second home, and he gave his wife Prabhabati full control over its operations.¹³

As India moved closer to gaining independence, various political

changes were implemented, such as the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims under the Government of India Act in 1935. However, this decision sparked heated debates and conflicts among different groups. In Assam, Hindus and Muslims made up approximately 42% and 32% of the population respectively in 1941. The already fragile political environment worsened when linguistic identities began to overshadow religious identities. Between 1936 and 1947, Assam witnessed intense and bitter political contestations, resulting in six different governments with a brief period of Governor's rule in between. Out of these six governments, two were led by the Congress party and four by the Muslim League. These political conflicts had long-lasting effects on the socio-economic and political relations of the Marwari community in Assam.¹⁴

After the Cripps expedition failed, Gandhi realized the futility of waiting for the British to respond positively and ultimately in the first week of August he gave the call of Quit India. The government reacted and started detaining all of the Congress's top leaders as well as those of the other organizations.¹⁵ Hem Baruah brought Jyoti Prasad to Guwahati to help him coordinate the movement throughout Assam. In Guwahati, Jyoti Prasad was selected to lead the Assam State Shanti Sena and propagate the movement throughout the whole state. Jyoti Prasad assumed the task of organising the crowd despite worries about his health at home. When the police showed up at his house, he was taken into custody. The 'Quit India' campaign intensified in Assam. Assam was as violent as the rest of India. Trains derailed, railway tracks were dismantled, police stations and government buildings were set on fire, and the situation was volatile. Jyoti Prasad, even at this hour, advised the volunteers to follow Gandhiji's 'ahimsa' way. The goal of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's Mrityu Bahini was to quietly and boldly approach armed police officers and to remain steadfast in the face of gunfire, even if it meant sacrificing their lives. Training camps were secretly set up in remote locations. A plan of action was developed. The Indian tricolour was to be flown at several Assamese police stations and butcheries. When the armed police met the Mrityu Bahini volunteers, Jyoti Prasad broke with the previous custom of submissive surrender and ordered them to place garlands on the firearms. The Indian tricolour was to be hoisted in Gohpur and Dhekiajuli on September 20, 1942.¹⁶ But by that time, the Pradesh Congress decided to send Jyoti Prasad to Calcutta in November to discuss the next course of action with the All India Congress Committee and to obtain immediate financial support. They further believed that staying there would be safer for him. In January 1943, he gave Lakhiprasad Goswami command of the Shanti Sena and left for Calcutta.¹⁷

The suppression of the pro-1942 Movement continued and every possible inhuman torture was inflicted on protesters by the police. The youngsters were executed, women were molested and the protesters were beaten to death. There were nine locations in the province where firing occurred: Webezia, Barpujia and Berhampur (Nagaon district), Dhukidhada (Goalpara district), Sahali and Bajali (Barpeta district), and

Dhekiajuli and Gohpur (Tezpur district).¹⁸ Several Marwari leaders played active roles in the freedom struggle movement. One such leader was Ganesh Prasad Phogla, who was involved in the 1942 movement in Assam. The British government closely kept a watch on him, and when they realized that his presence posed a threat, he was arrested immediately and imprisoned for two months. However, he was later released. Another Marwari Congress worker, Bhagwati Prasad Ladiya, who had been a member of the local Congress Committee since 1936, played a significant role in the 1942 movement. His responsibilities included secretly sending the daily newspaper *Do or Die* to Assam for publication and promoting it. He was also responsible for printing and distributing bulletins in the Assamese language, as mentioned in a letter. Shri Nandram Bajaj had been associated with the Congress since 1930 and actively participated in the Salt Satyagraha. He served as the President of the Rangamati Congress Committee for eight years. During the 1942 movement, he took charge of publishing and publicizing Congress bulletins with great dignity. He provided extensive assistance to fellow workers in their endeavours. Padmasukh Agarwal, a prominent member of the Sarupathar Congress Committee, served as the treasurer. He actively participated in the 1942 movement and was arrested for his involvement in sabotaging a military train in Sorupayar. While in jail, he faced severe brutality from the government. Eventually, the Assam government exiled him. Chhaganlal Jain played a special role in public works and can be considered the pioneer of the purdah boycott movement in Assam. He actively participated in the 1942 movement, engaging in destructive activities and contributing to secret operations. Despite the government's efforts, they were unable to trace him. These Marwari leaders, along with many others, made significant contributions to the freedom struggle movement in Assam, facing hardships and sacrifices in their pursuit of independence.¹⁹

During that period, underground freedom fighters from several Indian provinces chose Calcutta as a hideout. Assamese underground freedom fighters utilized Bhola and Haren Bhuyan's home on Golf Club Road as a place of refuge in Calcutta.²⁰ As all of the Assamese leaders and party workers were imprisoned and sitting in Calcutta, Aruna Asaf Ali and a few well-known Marwari leaders, like Bhanwarmal Singhi and his wife Sushila Devi, and others, continued to fuel their insurrection with cash, people, and other support. There were attempts but failed to establish communication with the Azad Hind Fauj.²¹ The Assamese nonviolent activists suffered greatly under the British administration during this period, and many of them became martyrs. Kanaklata, Mukunda Kakoty, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Thogi Sut, Nidhanu Rajbongshi, Ratan Kachari, and others may be mentioned among them.²²

Assam can reflect the history of the Indian freedom struggle with pride, owing to the sacrifice made by these martyrs. Even though the Assamese movement opposed the British in a non-violent way, certain Congressmen were compelled to form a suicide squad due to the crimes committed by the

government. This group engaged in subversive acts such as blowing up railroads, burning bridges, assaulting army outposts, and cutting off communications. Kushal Konwar, a devoted follower of Gandhi, avoided contact with the 'Suicide Squad' because he disapproved of their actions. But regrettably, Kushal Konwar met a terrible end due to a sabotage act committed by the squad's volunteers.²³

A train carrying British soldiers derailed on October 10, 1942, at 1:52 in the evening, approximately one kilometre from the Sarupathar Railway station. Witnesses reported that approximately one thousand soldiers perished in the incident. It was created by the 'Suicide Squad'. Because fish plates were taken off the track, the derailment occurred. Police and Army forces closed off the Sarupathar region immediately following the disaster and committed indiscriminate atrocities and arrests. A large number of freedom fighters were imprisoned after being associated with the incident. Many people at the time suggested Kushal Konwar to go underground, but Konwar refused. As a well-known member of the Golaghat District Congress Committee, Konwar was wrongly accused and detained alongside forty-three other people. The Golaghat Magistrate ordered Kushal Konwar and others to be taken to jail on November 5, 1942, citing them as being under trial. Kushal Konwar spent a total of 221 days at Jorhat Jail. The first 121 days were spent in detention pending trial and the remaining 100 days were spent in isolation as a prisoner serving a death sentence. As a prisoner awaiting trial, Konwar spoke with several well-known Assamese leaders while he was incarcerated, including Gopinath Bordoloi, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, and others. He was respected by each of them. His ethical perspective, his progressive ideals, and his familiarity with the Gita, Bhagawat, and Kirtan Ghosha left a lasting impression.²⁴

On February 11, 1943, the Sarupathar train disaster trial started underway. The trial was held outside of any regular court that the British colonialists had set up. The Governor General used to enact ordinances whenever he felt like it in order to put an end to the 1942 movement. Thus, the trial was conducted according to a comparable ordinance (Ordinance III of 1942 and Section 109 of I. P. C.), which granted the District Commissioner particular authority. The trial had no Indian judge assigned to it. The trial was to be presided over by Mr Campbell Andrew Humphrey, Deputy Commissioner of the Sivasagar District. Using every tool at its disposal, the British Regime plotted the connection of Kushal Konwar to the accident. Many were compelled into testifying against Kushal Konwar by threats, persuasion, temptation, and even torture. It was merely a trial in name. The trial hearing started at the Jorhat jail on Saturday, March 6, 1943. Of the seventeen detainees, Dhaneswar Gogoi received a sentence of three years in jail with the possibility of release on bond, while Indreswar Phukan and Nagen Chutiya received sentences of ten years harsh imprisonment each. However, due to a lack of proof, Kushal Konwar, Dharmakanta Deka, Ghanashyam Saikia, and Kanakeswar Konwar were set to be hanged, while the others were released. Later, on April 26, 1943, the Assamese Governor

commuted the death penalty for Ghanashyam Saikia, Dharma Deka, and Kanakeswar Konwar and instead sentenced them to ten years of tedious labour. However, Kushal Konwar's death sentence prevailed. Many well-known Assamese lawyers, leaders, and residents signed a petition to Governor General Lord Linlithgow pleading for Konwar's life to be spared. The petition was turned down, nevertheless. Konwar therefore bided his time in prison, anxiously awaiting his release. His spirits, however, remained unbowed. He invoked sacred texts and conversations while projecting an air of complete serenity. When Konwar's wife, brother, and three kids visited him in jail three days before his death, he encouraged his wife, who broke down hysterically, by telling her that he felt "blessed that God had given me the chance to give my life in service of the nation." A day before the hanging, his meeting with some prominent leaders was a historic moment. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Tayabullah, Amiyo Kumar Das, and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed had gone to console him in jail, but they came away consoled.²⁵ About this Gopinath Bordoloi had written in his diary on 14 June, 1943.²⁶

On 15th June 1943 a dozen armed constables, a hangman, a magistrate, a jailor, an assistant jailor, a civil surgeon, and Deputy Commissioner Humphrey were there in jail. He awoke with a start when the jailer yelled his name. Kushal Konwar got up, showered, prayed, recited the Gita, and stood up to follow the jailor when the jailor told him it was his turn. He approached the platform where he was to be hanged with a composed gait and greeted the crowd. If someone thought he had done anything wrong, he begged their pardon. Then he shouted, 'Inquilab Jindabad', and proclaimed he was praying to God for the country to be free. The thirty-eight-year-old Marwari freedom fighter's life ended with a thud as the Magistrate gave a signal with a white handkerchief. In death, he triumphed, and the British government was overthrown since their Goddess of Justice had been defeated. At 4:30 in the morning, it began to rain, as though Kushal Konwar's mortal bones were being showered with flowers by the universe and it made him immortal.²⁷

Jyoti Prasad provided an improved action plan to all leaders in Calcutta for their consideration. All of the provinces received this for consultation. The idea that all Congress satyagrahis assemble in Pune on August 9, 1943, and conduct a nonviolent parade to the Agha Khan Palace calling for Gandhiji's release was accepted, even though none of the other recommendations were accepted. Agha Khan Palace served as Gandhiji's place of incarceration. But to keep them from participating in the march, a large number of Satyagrahis were imprisoned in their home provinces. Others were detained while travelling. In spite of this, a large number of people travelled to Pune and marched to Agha Khan Palace, calling for Gandhiji's release from custody. This was called 'Gandhi Jatra' (August 9, 1943). Two groups of satyagrahis, one from Tezpur and the other from Guwahati, were ready to leave Assam. Rangapara witnessed the arrest of the Tezpur group. After travelling to Pune, the Guwahati group of satyagrahis

was detained and returned. Jyoti Prasad was en route to surrender, thus he was unable to attend. Following a string of violent events during the Quit India movement, the British launched a persistent campaign demonising Gandhiji's nonviolent principles. They referred to Gandhi's nonviolence as a front used to encourage terrorist acts. Gandhiji was very troubled by these accusations as well as the acts of violence committed by campaigners operating underground.²⁸

Gandhiji fasted for 21 days in February 1943 as repentance for the violent incidents. In addition, he urged all of the Congressmen who had fled to surrender and uphold nonviolent beliefs. Jyoti Prasad chose to follow Gandhiji's instruction, but the socialist wing of the Congress party did not reply to the plea. The government issued instructions to seize all of the Defence of India Rules' assets and companies at the start of 1943. Notifications were delivered to the Agarwala family at 'Poki', Tezpur, under the Bholaguri T.E., to their residence in Dibrugarh, to Tamulbari T.E., and Assam Printers & Publishers Ltd., Guwahati. The family of Jyoti Prasad was under a great deal of stress by that point. His health was also not good. Leaders such as Sucheta Kripalani, Achyut Patwardhan, Annada Prasad Choudhary, and others advised him to submit given the circumstances. Jyoti Prasad decided to submit at Tezpur in compliance with Gandhiji's instructions. August 6, 1943, witnessed the arrest of Jyoti Prasad Agarwal.²⁹

He went to a medical examination following the arrest. According to the Civil Surgeon, he required extensive therapy for dyspepsia and chronic bronchitis. Since there was no proof that he had engaged in acts of violence, the District Judge made the humanitarian decision to release him. Jyoti Prasad was consequently set free on a one-month bail. It is known that he was required to post two sureties for the sum of Rs. 500 each and pay bail of Rs. 1000. The attachment orders against the assets and companies owned by his family were cancelled as a result of his surrender and the lack of any proof of aggressive behaviour against him. Lal Bazar police raided his brother-in-law Bhola Bhuyan's home in Calcutta. He was taken into custody for keeping escaped freedom fighters and for having freedom-promoting documents and leaflets in his possession. On December 4, 1943, the Defence of India Rules case against Jyoti Prasad was ultimately dropped.³⁰

To conclude this it has to be mentioned that the Marwaris have made a lasting impact on Assam. Known for their entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen, the Marwaris have played a vital role in shaping the industrial and economic landscape of Assam. In the political arena, along with Assamese leadership, these Marwaris have actively participated and made significant contributions to Assam. The life of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala is a shining example of Marwaris' participation in the Gandhian National Movement. He died at the age of 48 but he remains a great icon of modern Assam.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 132
4. West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, I.B. File No. 278G/20, 'Non-Cooperation Movement in Bengal and Assam', p. (page no. is not found),
5. 'Kushal Konwar Or SwahidKushal konwar Or Martyr Kushal Konwar' from www.assaminfo.com, accessed in 20.04.2019
6. The ancestors of J. P. Agarwala (1903-1951) came to Assam in early nineteenth century. His family earlier lived in Marwar region of Rajasthan.
7. The Commonwealth of India League, which Annie Besant founded in London in 1922, was renamed the India League in 1928. Its members included famous British academics, parliamentarians, and diplomats as well as educated Indians from England. It promoted Indian independence while informing the British people on the drawbacks of colonial authority. V. K. Krishna Menon, an activist and attorney who was then based in London, took the initiative. The India League at the time was staffed by many Indian students studying in England.
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26. Although I have not located Gopinath Bordoloi's Diary, it is mentioned in a

book that I am consulting for this information. The language of this book is Assamese. Numerous writings by Bordoloi that he wrote while jailed and from other locations have been found and incorporated into this book. For further details see Chandraprasad Saikia, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, Assam Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, 1979, p. 123

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29. Pranjit Agarwala, *op. cit.*, pp. 256
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