

Assamese Women and their Organization in India's Freedom Movement

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Abstract: *This study explores the pivotal role of Assamese women and their organizations in India's freedom movement. It sheds light on their contributions, sacrifices, and the impact of their actions on the socio-political landscape of India during the struggle for independence.*

Keywords: Assamese women, Women's organizations, India's freedom movement, Socio-political history, Gender and nationalism

1. Introduction

Indian socio-political history has been ornamented by the saga of patriotism and the heroic sacrifices made by the Indian masses for the attainment of Swaraj. The Indian National movement was a long drawn struggle of the people of India irrespective of sex, caste and creed against British rule. The Indian women had earned the recognition by their earnest and active participation in the movement of India. India has produced a good number of women who played an important role to make her free from the clutches of the British. Along with the men, the women of Assam also responded to each and every phases of the freedom movement launched by Gandhi, however woman's role has not been given due place and recognition in the construction of history. Gandhi's entry in the national movement encouraged a greater section of woman to join the national movement. They participated in the movement by organizing processions and picketing and undertaking tours to the remotest areas to propagate the message of the movement. They wholeheartedly undertook Gandhiji's constructive programs like spinning and weaving in large scale along with the task of removal of untouchability. However, woman's role has not been given due place and recognition in the construction of history. Within the enclosures of socially accepted patriarchy, woman stepped out into the public domain and tried to carve out a place for herself. In this paper an attempt is being made to evaluate the role of the Women Of Assam and the contribution of Women Organization of colonial Assam in the freedom struggle of India which reshaped their own lives due to nationalist needs.

Objective

During the of freedom movement from 1921 to 1947, the women of Assam like that of India also played a very significant role. But we do not know much about the contribution in attaining country's freedom as most of the writers of history have narrated few lines about them. The objective of the study is to evaluate the role of the women of Assam in the freedom struggle of India which reshaped their own lives due to nationalist needs. An attempt will also be made to study the role of women organization of colonial Assam to reshape the lives of Assamese women due to national needs.

2. Methodology

In this paper both collective and descriptive viewpoint are used to discuss the topics, mostly collected from secondary source of data, which contains, government data, newspaper, related books and journals, reprint of published papers, soft copies included web pages, pdf files downloaded from the websites.

Analysis:

The participation of women of the country up to the 19th century state policy was restricted only to the members of the royal and noble families. The socio-economic condition of that time was not favorable for womanhood to take part in the political sphere. The all India Women's Organizations like the Bharat Mahila Parishad was established in 1904 and Bharat Stri Mahamandal and The Women's Indian Association were established in 1910 and 1917 respectively. Gandhi's entry in the national movement encouraged a greater section of woman to join the national movement. Gandhi was of the opinion that woman's patience and antipathy to violence made them particularly fit for the Satyagraha and Non-Violent movement which he had launched. In 1920, Gandhi started the Non-cooperation movement as an only instrument to expel the British from India who had occupied the country in 1757 AD as a result of the battle of Plassey and ruled for nearly 200 years.

Assam the eastern most state of India was noticeably drawn to the national mainstream in 1921 with the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC). Gandhi's leadership of the National Congress in 1920 and call for the Non-cooperation movement drew a large number of men and women throughout the country to the national struggle for freedom. In 1921 Gandhi visited Assam. It had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam. His good impression of the women of Assam greatly increased the latter's self-confidence and strength of mind. After that, women of Assam also did not lag behind the other women of India. Give courage by the call of Gandhi, they came out from the four walls of their domestic life and took an active part in the struggle for India's Independence. The women of Assam were true followers of Gandhi. They had great faith in the principles of non violence. Most of the participated in the Non Co-operation movement through programmes of

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spinning, weaving and boycotting of foreign goods. Their constructive work did much to earn good name for them. Mention may be made Of Bidyut Prova Devi, Girija Devi, Nalini Bala Devi, Snehlata Bhattacharya, Dharma Devi, Chandrapabha Saikiani, Sarala Das, Kiran Bala Barkakati, Kiranamyee Agarwala, Bhadreswari Devi, Lilaboti Kakoti, Sashiprova Das, Ratna Bezbaruah, Guneswari Majumdaer, Khagendrapriya Baruah, Bhanumoti Talukdar, Hemantakumari Devi, and many others who took an active part in the Non Co - Oration movement.

During this period the Assamese women participated in the movement through the Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Student Association) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) till the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti (Assam Women Association) in 1926 which was a provincial women association.⁶ Large number of women joined the movement by participating in meetings, organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Under the able leadership of brave patriots like Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Chandra kumar Agarwalla some women mostly from the urban areas and belonging to the families of congress leaders and workers came forward to take up organizational and publicity work among the rural women. The promotion of spinning and weaving was one of the major constructive program of the Non - cooperation movement. In this regard the achievement of the Assamese women was remarkable. Almost all the women of Assam, irrespective of their caste creed, and status were efficient in spinning and weaving. It was due to the large-scale production of the "khadi" by the women, the boycott of foreign clothes was highly successful in Assam. When Gandhiji visited Assam, an Assamese lady known as Bar Raja welcomed him with a nicely woven cloth of hand-spun thread. The contribution to the Tilak Swaraj Fund was another important part of constructive program. Assamese women contributed both in cash and kind. Twelve ladies from the Sibsagar town donated all their valuable ornaments to the fund. Instances of parting with diamond rings were also reported. Bhanumati Talukdar, whom Gandhiji called the 'Sorojini' of Assam, left her family (husband and children) to work exclusively for the congress.¹¹ A few other devoted workers, like Chandraprova Saikiani of Darrang district, gave up their jobs to participate in the movement actively and effectively.

Mungri alias Malatimem, women of the tea garden labour community of lalmati tea garden of Darrang District of Assam was the first women martyr of Assam who ended her life for cause of the Non - Co - Operation movement of 1921.

In this connection we may mention the name of tribal women of undivided Assam NAMED Rani Gaidilieu aged nearly nineteen years who did her best to raise the banner of independence and called her people to rally round it.

In 1930, the Civil Disobedience movement was started. In this time women of Assam also became active and participated in the different programmes of the Congress. Being led by the non violence principle of Gandhi, almost all the section of women of Assam did their best to make the

movement successful one. Tribal women of the North East also showed courage in taking an important part in joining the movement. They did many constructive as well as public works as programme works of the movement. Their service helped the men working day and night as the active workers of the congress. The formation women squad by the women was of great importance for the movement. Women in Assam organized picketing in front of the shops dealing in liquor, opium and foreign goods. They also picketed in front of the educational institutions to keep the students away from taking lessons in any government school. They also actively participated in fund collection for the congress and in campaign against untouchability and popularization of Hindi, which was to be considered as the national language. During the period of Civil Disobedience movement in 1930 some girl students of Assam decided to start a revolutionary organization called the 'Mukti Sangha' in the premises of Kamrup Mahila Samity (Women Association) building. They were Puspalata Das, general secretary of the students' union of the Panbazar Girls' High School, Sarala Saxena and Jyotsna Mazumdar. The girls took a pledge to fight for the liberation of the country from alien rule and signed it with their blood.¹³ Thereafter, Sukumari and Parul Moitra, daughter of Suren Moitra— the famous revolutionary from Rajshahi also joined the Mukti Sangha. When the school authorities came to know about this Pushpalata Das was expelled from the school. The prohibition of opium and liquor was another important item of Gandhiji's constructive program. The women of Assam also participated in this program by picketing before the opium and liquor shops. Those people who refused to give up intoxication were socially boycotted. Dariki Dasi Baruah, an anti-opium worker of Golaghat was arrested on February 1, 1932 for taking active part in anti - opium picketing programme and was imprisoned for six months.

In the 1940 - 41 was the Satyagraha Phase of the freedom, women of the Brahmaputra Valley joined not only the individual Satyagraha but also the collective Satyagraha. In this connection, we may remember Swarnalatas Baruah and Haripriya Dutta of Golaghat who were the first women of this valley to undergo rigorous imprisonment because their participation in the individual Satyagraha. It is learn from other source that many women from deferent places of Assam also took the path of Swarnalata and Haripriya, To make the Movement successful, many training centers for women were opened in deferent places of Assam.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was a mass upsurge of unprecedented dimensions. The 1942 Movement launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was popularly known as the Quit India Movement. Actually this was a giant fight of the Indians led by Gandhi who by that time became the pole start for our struggle for freedom. A new chapter in Indian freedom struggle began with the Quit India Movement. It dew many Assamese forefront of the movement and thereby they played a remarkable role in it. However, the Quit India movement of India. Kanaklata Barua was the most famous martyr of this movement . Women like Amalprova Das, Chandraprava Saikiani, Puspalata Das and many others become busy with the work of Organisation. Women from both rural and urban areas promised to die for the sake of attaining independence of

India. They suffered various injuries and even death but they proved themselves to be best missionaries for the villages.

The women of Assam understood Gandhi's concept of 'Do or Die' in their own way and participated in all types of activities during the Quit India movement. The Darrang District Congress Committee of Assam decided to hoist the national flag on the police stations and the court buildings, which were the symbols of British authority. Accordingly, the plan was drawn under the leadership of Pushpalata Das to hoist the national flag on 20th September in Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Bihali and Sootea. It was decided to come out in processions consisting of men and women from nearby villages and to proceed for flag hoisting. The police opened fire on the peaceful processionists at Gohpur and Dhekiajuli. Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Devi and Kamuli Devi died of bullet injuries on the spot and many others were badly injured.

Most of the Assamese women generally participated in the movement on Gandhian non-violent line. But some of them being disappointed with the Gandhian methods became involved in underground and extremist activities.

In 1946 the cabinet mission proposed the introduction of Grouping system but the Assamese women protested against the proposal of the same to include Assam in Group C. It was Puspallata Das who moved Anti-Grouping Resolution in the secret meeting of the Congress Working Committee held on the 4th January 1947.

Woman Freedom Martyrs of Assam:

The Indian independence movement was a time of numerous revolts and rebellions of different ideologies. Nationalist sentiment rose to its peak and seeped into every nook and corner of the nation. It was a time when the nation witnessed innumerable stories of courage, determination and sacrifice.

Assam was not left behind in this wide playing revolt. Several individuals — men and women alike — dived into the movement with burning determination.

The womenfolk were nowhere even a step behind the men in fighting for the country's independence. They participated fearlessly and wholeheartedly. While many embraced martyrdom for the love of the nation, other freedom activists were injured in lathi attacks and police firing. In fighting for the country's liberation, they had to bear the brunt of the British fury but that did not dampen their spirit.

Some of these brave heart women, who fought for independence and eventually sacrificed their life for the cause, are listed below:

Kanaklata Barua, Gohpur

An active organizer and member of Mrityu Bahini, Kanaklata was shot dead by the British police on September 20, 1942 while she was leading a procession holding the national flag during the Quit India Movement. She was just 18.

Mungri alias Malati Mem, Lalmati, Darrang
She was one of the leading members of the anti - opium campaign in tea gardens. In 1921, she was killed by government supporters at Lalmati in Darrang district for supporting Congress volunteers in prohibition campaign.

Dariki Dasi Baruah, Golaghat

She was actively involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement and was one of the leading members of the anti - opium campaign. She was arrested on February 1, 1932, and jailed for six months for anti - opium picketing. She was pregnant at the time of imprisonment. She refused to take conditional release from jail. Eventually, she fell sick and died in the jail on April 26, 1932.

Bhogeswari Phukanani, Nagaon

She was an active organizer of the freedom movement in Nagaon. On September 18, 1942, she was shot by the British while marching forward with the national flag at Barhampur. She died three days later.

Tileswari Barua, Dhekiajuli

She was an active participant in the Quit India Movement from Dhekiajuli. On September 20, 1920, she was shot dead in police firing while trying to hoist the national flag at Dhekiajuli. Kanaklata Barua also died the same day.

Rebati Lahon, Teok

She was an active participant and organizer of the Quit India Movement. She was jailed in 1942. During imprisonment, she suffered from pneumonia due to the poor living condition in jail. She died soon after coming out of imprisonment.

Khahuli Devi, Dhekiajuli

She was shot dead in Dhekiajuli police firing on September 20, 1942. She was pregnant at that time.

Kumali Devi, Dhekiajuli

She was another brave heart who was shot dead at the Dhekiajuli police firing along with Tileswari Baruah and Khahuli Devi on September 20, 1942.

Padumi Gogoi, Dhekiajuli

She was an active participant in the Quit India Movement from Dhekiajuli. She was wounded in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on September 20, 1942. She was arrested and jailed for six months. She was released with worn out health and died soon.

Golapi Chutiani, Dhekiajuli

She was actively involved in the 1942 movement in Dhekiajuli. The police resorted to firing and lathicharge to block the revolt. She was wounded severely in the lathi attack and later succumbed to her injuries.

Lila Neogoni, Lakhimpur

She was actively involved in the 1942 revolt. She was severely beaten by the police at Lakhimpur in 1942 while participating in a procession against them. She succumbed to her injuries after two months.

Thunuki Das, Dhekiajuli

She was an active participant in the 1942 revolt at Dhekiajuli. She was injured in the lathicharge that took place near Dhekiajuli police station on September 20, 1942, and died a few days later.

Jaluki Kachariani, Dhekiajuli

She was another active participant of 1942 revolt. She got bullet injury in the Dhekiajuli police firing on September 20, 1942, and died soon after.

Kon Chutiani, Dhekiajuli She was also injured in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on September 20, 1942, and succumbed to her injuries a few days later.

3. Findings

On 15th August 1947 India became Independent from the British rule. The role played by the women of Assam in the freedom movement is a story of devotion, sacrifice and patriotism for which their names will remain letters of gold in the history of India's freedom struggle. The role of Assamese women in the freedom of India was really praise worthy. Their help and cooperation from the beginning of the freedom struggle led them to busy with works of the Congress as workers. While taking the legacy of the Assamese women in the political affairs, we must look at the general atmosphere of the position and social status of women in the Assamese society.

4. Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the involvement of women in the freedom movement became massive in scale and similar in nature to that of the male participants. Many women also contributed to the cause of freedom by bearing patiently the hardships. This struggle of the women headed by women's organization was also the struggle for emancipation. Providing them a public space, it give woman a scope to define a self - image, in terms of an individual and separate identity rather than the traditional identity of being a daughter, wife and mother.

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