



Women of Assam and Freedom Struggle of India

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ABSTRACT:

During the freedom movement entry of M.K Gandhi in Indian politics was an important landmark in India's struggle for freedom from British rule. It brought a new confidence among the Indians and encouraged the women to fight for the cause of the nation. The movement encouraged participation from different regions, backgrounds and all walks of life, these women united under the common banner of freedom, leaving an indelible mark on history of freedom struggle. Irrespective of caste, creed, sex and religion both men and women all groups became the cadre of the movement against British rule. Along with the men, the women also participated to each and every phases of the freedom movement in Assam. However woman's role and contribution has not been given due place and recognition in the construction of history of Indian freedom struggle. Within the four walls of socially accepted norms, women stepped out into the public domain and tried to find a place for themselves. But Gandhian era of national movement encouraged woman folks to join the national movement and participate in various important programs like- spinning and weaving, removal of untouchability, raising the status of women through their active participation. But their sacrifice for the nation was considered a mere extension of her domesticity. In this study an attempt is being made to evaluate the role of women of Assam in the freedom struggle of India and thereby give due credit for their role and contribution towards the freedom movement.

KEY WORD: Women, Politics, Assam, Movement, Freedom, Indian.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Indian political history has been gifted by the saga of patriotism and the heroic sacrifices made by the Indians for the cause of freedom. Indian people irrespective of caste, creed, sex and religion participated in the freedom struggle against British rule. Both men and women of Assam actively participated to each and every phases of the freedom movement launched by Gandhi. Quit India movement initiated by Gandhi was an important landmark in India's struggle for freedom from British colonial rule where women of Assam also actively joint in the movement along with men by organizing numbers of procession. The movement encouraged participation from different regions, backgrounds and all walks of life, these women united under the common banner of freedom, leaving an indelible mark on history of freedom struggle. Women along with men formed the cadre of the movement picketing and undertaking tours to every nook and corner to propagate the message of freedom movement. Women of Assam actively participated Gandhi constructive programs like spinning and weaving, removal of blind faith and popularization of Hindi as a national language etc. in large scale along with the men. In 1942, the women of Assam perhaps ahead of all other women of the country in respect of courage and sacrifice they have showed during Quit India movement. During this period they participated in the movement both on non-violent Gandhian way and violent way of revolutionary. The revolutionary group of women helped their male counterparts in cutting telephone and telegraph lines, burning government buildings and damaging bridges to paralyze the British administration. Such activities led the government to take repressive measures to suppress the women folk. They were harassed both mentally and physically, which in turn aroused the common people to fight for the noble cause of freedom (Arya: 20 00:87). However, woman's role has not been given due place and recognition in the construction of history. Woman's role had been diverse-supportive, leadership and active participation; A story of devotion, courage and visionary ideas. Through their active role in the freedom struggle they made noteworthy contribution towards improvement of woman status, expansion of woman's education and organization of woman and social welfare

(Sharma: 2014: 54). In this article an attempt is being made to evaluate the role of the women of Assam in the freedom struggle of India which reshaped their own lives due to nationalist needs and thereby give due recognition of role and contribution towards the freedom of nation from the British rule.

OBJECTIVES:

1. The objective of the study is to evaluate the role of the women of Assam in different phases of freedom movement of India.
2. An attempt is also made to study the role of British government how they want to suppress the women of Assam who became the mouthpiece and messenger of movement in every nook and corner in Assam during agitation period.

II. METHODOLOGY:

The study involves the qualitative and analytical method of research on the basis of both primary and secondary sources which contains the Government reports, proceedings, newspaper, related books and journals, reprint of published papers, soft copies included web pages.

III. DISCUSSIONS:

The struggle for India's independence from British rule was marked not only the bravery of men but also by the indomitable spirit of women who stood shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. Throughout the tumultuous journey towards freedom, numerous women displayed unwavering determination, resilience and patriotism. The history of Indian struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. History has witnessed many women with exceptional bravery and intelligence who walked shoulder to shoulder with men of their times. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. So, the participation of women in the freedom struggle and national awakening is simply incredible and praise worthy.

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. Gandhi encouraged the woman to be politically active 'he seemed also to link their activism to their traditional roles and what he saw as the essential spirituality of woman. At the same time Gandhi emphasized the revival of hand spinning and hand weaving, removal of untouchability, raising the status of women and promotion of Hindu- Muslim unity to face the colonial government with a united stand.

In 1921 M.K. Gandhi visit in Assam had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam. Large number of women joined the movement by participating in meetings, organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Under the leading dedicated leadership of Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, Rupnath Brahma, Kalicharan Brahma, Madaram Brahma, Abindra Basumatary, Jayram Brahma and Deben Basumatary etc. some women mostly from the urban areas and the families of congress leaders and workers came forward to take up organizational and publicity work among the rural women. To convince the common people the need of the hour to expel the British rule was not an easy at that time who could not think of any alternative of it.

The promotion of spinning and weaving was one of the major organizational programs of the Non-cooperation movement of Gandhi. In this program participation of Assamese women was remarkable. The women of Assam, irrespective of caste, creed, and status were expert in spinning and weaving. Because of the large scale production of the "khadi" by the women, the boycott of foreign clothes was successful in Assam. As per appealed by Gandhi to boycott all foreign goods a large number of women of Assam threw away their foreign clothes and organized a bonfire of the foreign goods.

Besides the promotion of spinning and weaving prohibition of opium and liquor was another important program of Gandhi's. 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 (Begum, S. & Goswami, M.:1997:79). Dariki Dasi Baruah, an anti opium worker of Golaghat was arrested on February 1, 1932 for taking active part in anti opium picketing and was imprisoned for six months. She was in an advanced stage of pregnancy at the time of her arrest. In the jail she suffered from dysentery and finally breathed her last due to miscarriage. The authorities of the Sibsagar jail advised her to appeal for a conditional release, but she straightway refused to comply with the advice till the last hour of her life. This patriotic woman who left behind the example of strong determination, sacrifice and greatness is yet to find her rightful place amongst the martyrs at the national level. Further, Women of Assam contributed both in cash and kind in order to run organizational activities against the British rule. There are instances of few other devoted workers, who gave up their jobs and

family in order to participate in the movement more effectively. 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.

Quit India movement was the third and the last struggle where Gandhi adopted the slogan 'Do or Die'. Immediately, after the adoption of the Quit India resolution, the congress organizations both at the central, provincial, district and block levels were directed to gear up themselves and to enroll volunteers on a large scale for the movement. Assam also witnessed an unmatched game of tears and blood during the 1942 Quit India Movement. Several Assam Women, who were members of the Mritu-Bahini or Santi-Sena were the backbone of the movement. Non payment of taxes and revenue, anti war propaganda, defiance of the law, boycott, picketing and hunger strikes were cited as probable agenda for the future course of action.

Women of Assam joined the movement in large numbers. Many Satyagrahi training centers for the women were opened in different places of Assam. It may be worth mentioning that in the Quit India movement, there were two types of programs. One was constructive and the other one was destructive. One section of the population was firm in its conviction that the sequence of meetings and processions had been tedious and fruitless. They therefore resorted to a series of underground activities which included disruption of communication by cutting telegraph and telephone lines, sometimes even destroying bridges and railway lines and burning government properties and buildings. Needless to say, those freedom fighters, which had chosen this revolutionary path, had to face untold miseries. In most urban areas the students, both boys and girls continued to play an active part in the underground movement by not only boycotting their educational institutions but also by organizing themselves into Death Squads known as "Mrityu Bahini"(Bhuya :2000:166-67 ,cited in Sharma Puzari, R. R.:2001:125).

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, Government offices 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 precisionists at Gohpur and Dhekiajuli. Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Devi and Kamuli Devi died of bullet injuries on the spot and many others were badly injured.

Several thousand men and women were participated in the non-cooperation movement, launched by Mahatma Gandhi on 4th September 1920. In 1921, along with Bodo youth's numbers of Bodo women's were organized protest rallies in streets and bazaars of then undivided Goalpara district. They protested by shouting slogans like "Vande Mataram", "Mahatma Gandhi - Long Live", etc. Some of them including Abindra Basumatary, Jayram Brahma and Deben Basumatary were arrested and imprisoned for three months for protesting against British.

During the said movement the protesters refused to buy British goods (boycott), advocated the use of local handicrafts, set up vigils in front of liquor stores, and promoted self sufficiency by spinning Khadi and buying only Indian-made goods. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Assam in 1926 to attend the 41st Indian National Congress at Pandu in Guwahati, he was impressed by the self-reliance of Bodo weavers in making their traditional looms, spinning local yarn, dyeing and weaving colorful handlooms display. He had a desire to visit Bodo villages to learn the technique and know-how of Bodo women. So, in 1934 he visited Bodo villages in Kazigaon and Rupsi, in Kokrajhar, to see for himself the rich cultural skills of Bodo women weavers.

Four Bodos from Goalpara district were selected by Mahatma Gandhi to participate in the Satyagraha movement in 1940. Mahatma Gandhi launched the Individual Satyagraha movement in 1940 to support the right to free speech and to highlight the power of individuality in the freedom struggle. They were Narapati Basumatary and Manishankar Basumatary (both from Dudhnoi) and Birendra Narayan Brahma and Jagendra Kumar Basumatary (both from Sidli).

During the Quite India movement in 1942, both men and women folks participated and some of them were badly injured and imprisoned including Jagendra Kumar Basumatary, Narapati Basumatary, Nilkumar Basumatary, Manishankar Basumatary, Biren Das Boro and Hira Charan Das Boro. All of them were imprisoned in Guwahati Jail. In the same year, the freedom fighters in Assam organized a program of hoisting the tricolor in various police stations of the region. When the freedom fighters hoisted the then Indian tricolor in Dhekiajuli in 1942, the police opened fire on them; fifteen people were killed and many injured. Among the fifteen killed by the police three were Mani Kachari, Ratan Kachari and Larela Kachari. Four critically were injured are Khundra Kachari, Hengra Boro, Rajendra Prasad Basumatary and Maina Kachari. In Lakhimpur Police Station Dutiram Boro was killed. Another freedom fighter named Raotaram Boro was also killed in Bajali Police Station. Two Bodo freedom fighters were seriously injured, leaving them paralyzed including Sriman Boro in Chaygaon Police Station and Bogain Kachari in Gohpur Police Station.

The police were given absolute power of repression to control the movement. The sufferings of the women of Assam during this period crossed all limits. Beating, slapping, kicking, insulting with the use of filthy language, forcefully entering the house during night hours and misbehaving with the womenfolk etc. were the common methods adopted by the police and military for the suppression of the womenfolk. According to the Bordoloi Committee Report on Atrocities committed in 1942, at least eighty women of the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam is called the Brahmaputra Valley) were victims of such heinous police outrages, which included mass raping and molestations. Even girls at the age of puberty were deflowered. Pregnant women also could not escape military brutality. As a result of military and police assault a few cases of miscarriage and births of stillborn babies were recorded in the report. In this way, women were tortured both physically and mentally in various ways (Assam Police Abstract: 1942).

IV. CONCLUSION:

The role played by the women of Assam in the freedom movement is a landmark of women folk's devastation, sacrifice and patriotism. It will be epoch making event in the history of Assam as one of the most notable contributions of women towards the attainment of *freedom*. It is a matter of regret that in spite of selfless contributions towards the different phases of the freedom movement in Assam, their sacrifice and sufferings did not receive due recognition and respect from the Government. The freedom fighters women of Assam should lauded their supreme sacrifice and give due respect. 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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