

Indian Freedom Struggle and the Role of Assamese Women: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT:

India has produced great women throughout her long political, social and cultural existence. One is reminded by the history of the gallant role played by Indian women in the period from 1921 to 1947 for the attainment of 'Swaraj' for India. 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 played a significant role in the period from 1921 to 1947 for the attainment of independence for India. The women of Assam also played an important part in the freedom struggle with great distinction. The role of the Assamese women in the freedom movement has its background in their past heritage. A brief picture of their position in the pre independence period is necessary to understand and appreciate the nature and extent of women's contribution to the movement. Assam's contribution to the struggle of Independence as one of its provinces were not in any way less than the rest of the country. Along with the men, Assamese women participated in all phases of Gandhi's liberation fight, including the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920/21), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942). They took part in the movement by organizing processions and picketing, as well as going on tours to the most remote locations to spread the movement's message. In this article an attempt is being made to evaluate the role of the Assamese women in the freedom struggle of India which reshaped their own lives due to nationalist needs.

Keywords: Assamese Women, Women Politics, Emancipation, National Movement, Freedom

INTRODUCTION

In any society, the position of women is regarded as “a significant pointer to the level of culture of that society”. Her position in the society is determined on the basis of the social values, and the trends or tendencies prevailing in the society. When the progressive trend holds ascendancy in the society, her position is improved greatly, “her status elevated, her subjection diminished and her rights extended” and her participation in social life becomes purposeful and meaningful. But on the other hand the forces of reaction may lead her to a state of degradation and humiliation.

In the Vedic age women of India enjoyed a high status. She had freedom of movement, education, religious rights and equal opportunities with man. But as time passed this freedom came to be curtailed by the rigidity of the prevalent social customs and practices. However, with the emergence of Buddhism, women’s status came to be improved again in different spheres of life. But the status of women again faced rough weather with the advent of foreigners in India.

Since the earliest times the society in Assam was influenced by the culture of the tribal people inhabiting in the region and her culture contains sizeable tribal elements. Although Vedic or Hindu influences played an important part in moulding her culture and social life, many tribal social values, long prevailing in the society, could not be discarded. As such, the freedom which women used to enjoy in earlier times could not be totally denied even after Aryanization of the tribal societies. Some customs like female infanticide, sati, and prohibition of the widow remarriage were strange ideas in Assamese societies. The liberal status of Women in the tribal societies invariably had its impact on the contemporary non- tribal society of the region (Sharma, D. 2013).

The epic of patriotism and heroic sacrifices undertaken by the Indian masses for the attainment of Swaraj have adorned Indian socio-political history. Indians of all sexes, castes, and creeds participated in the long-running battle against British colonialism. Along with the men, Assamese women participated in all phases of Gandhiji's liberation fight, including the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920/21), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942). They took part in the movement by organizing processions and picketing, as well as going on tours to the most remote locations to spread the movement's message. They enthusiastically participated in Gandhiji's constructive activities, such as large-scale spinning and weaving, as well as the mission of eliminating untouchability and popularizing Hindi as a national language. As a result, the women of Assam are credited with the Civil Disobedience Movement's glory. In terms of bravery and sacrifice, Assamese women may have excelled all other women in the country in 1942. During this time, they took part in the movement in both a nonviolent Gandhian and a revolutionary manner. To cripple the British administration, the revolutionary ladies assisted their male counterparts in cutting telephone and telegraph cables, destroying government buildings, and wrecking bridges. As a result of these actions, the government has taken oppressive measures against women. They were hounded emotionally and

physically, inciting the whole public to fight for the great cause of liberty (Arya: 2000:87). However, in the formation of history, the contribution of women has not been accorded appropriate weight and acknowledgment. The role of women had been varied—supportive, leadership, and active engagement; a narrative of commitment, courage, and imaginative ideas. They made a significant contribution to improving women's status, expanding women's education, and organizing women and social welfare via their active participation in the independence movement (Sharma: 2014: 54). The purpose of this essay is to assess the participation of Assamese women in India's liberation war, which transformed their own lives owing to nationalist needs.

OBJECIVE

The main objective is to review the involvement of Assamese women in India's liberation fight, which transformed their own lives in response to nationalist demands. An attempt will also be made to examine the role of the British authorities in suppressing Assamese women, who were the mouthpieces for the movement's message in every home.

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, pdf files (e-reprints) downloaded from the websites. The study will be based mainly on the primary sources, while secondary sources will be consulted wherever and whenever it is found necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gandhi's participation in the national movement inspired a larger number of women to join the cause. Gandhi believed that women's tolerance and aversion to violence made them ideal candidates for the Satyagraha and Non-Violent Movement that he had started. Sita and Draupadi, rather than the Rani of Jhansi, were the heroes he sought to imitate. Rather than aggressive intervention, his vision emphasized women's higher ability for suffering and self-sacrifice (Menon :2006: 9). Gandhi urged women to participate in politics, and he seemed to connect their action to their traditional duties and what he viewed as women's inherent spirituality. The two key emblems, khadi and salt, served as a connection between political action and their traditional responsibilities (Kumar :1993: 83). At the same time, Gandhi stressed the rebirth of hand spinning and weaving, the abolition of untouchability, the elevation of women's position, and the development of Hindu-Muslim solidarity in order to confront the alien administration with an unified front. He once penned these lines on the India of his dreams:

“I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony... There can be no room

in such an India for the curse of untouchability... Women will enjoy the same rights as men... This is the India of my dreams."

Assamese women in Non Cooperation Movement

In terms of the involvement of Indian women in the non-cooperation movement, it can be claimed that before 1930, women's participation in the freedom fight was restricted. Until this time, only a few women, usually from the families of national leaders like as C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru, or few college students in major cities, had participated in public political protests. That is why, on April 30, 1930, in the "Young India," Gandhiji urged Indian women to learn to spin yarn on the "charkha," to leave their homes, and to picket government institutions and businesses selling foreign products or liquor. In response to Gandhi's voice more and more women joined the movement and became arrested. In Delhi alone, which in those days was a socially conservative city, 1600 women were imprisoned for political activity. In Bombay, middle class women in large numbers joined the movement (Chandra, B., Tripathi, A., Barun, D.E.: 1972: 129-167). That is why the British observers wrote that if the civil disobedience movement had not accomplished anything else, it had contributed greatly to the social emancipation of Indian women.

In 1921, the Assam Provincial Congress Committee was formed, bringing Assam, India's easternmost state, into the national spotlight (APCC). Gandhiji's leadership of the National Congress and appeal for the Non-Cooperation Movement brought a large number of men and women from all over India to join the national liberation struggle in 1920. Gandhiji paid a visit to Assam in 1921 which had an energizing influence on the Assamese people. His positive view of Assamese women boosted the latter's self-assurance and mental toughness. 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 (Sharma: 1993:34-36). 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. They were namely Hemanta kumari Devi Bordoloi, poetess Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Rajabala Das etc (Bhuyan: 2000:146).

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 (Das: 2002: 43-44). When Gandhiji

visited Assam, an Assamese lady known as Bar Raja welcomed him with a nicely woven cloth of hand-spun thread. Gandhiji complimented— *“Assam will rise to its full height in the matter of swadeshi (National). Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves.”* In a meeting held on 18 th August 1921 in Guwahati, Gandhiji appealed to all to boycott foreign goods. Accordingly at the end of the meeting he proposed for a bonfire of the foreign clothes. A large number of women threw away their foreign clothes which they once considered to be precious.

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 (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 antiopium picketing programme 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. 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. A few other devoted workers, like Chandraprova Saikiani of Darrang district, gave up their jobs to participate in the movement actively and effectively. In 1930, the Civil Disobedience movement was started. It was a period of women’s awakening. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote

“most of us menfolk were in prison, and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise” (Sharma Puzari, R.R. and Mazan, K. :2001:123-24)

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.

Assamese women in Civil Disobedience Movement

In 1930, during the period of Civil Disobedience movement some girl students from Assam started a revolutionary organization namely the 'Mukti Sangha' in Kamrup Mahila Samity (Women Association) building premise. Those girls were Pupalata Das, Sarala Saxena and Jyotsna Mazumdar. Pupalata Das was general secretary of the students' union of the Panbazar Girls' High School. The girls took a pledge to fight for the liberation of the country from alien rule and signed it with their blood (Bhuyan: 2000:146). Others girls like Sukumari and Parul Moitra, daughter of Suren Moitra— the famous revolutionary from Rajshahi also joined the Mukti Sangha. Pupalata Das was expelled from the school due to her active participation. The historic Dandi-march was launched by Gandhiji on 12th March 1930, but it was too far from Assam so it was not possible for its people to join the march physically. As a result, they expanded their moral support by holding meetings in several locations, participating in symbolic processions, and breaking official orders and laws. In defiance of government instructions, a symbolic procession of a huge number of people, including some women, was carried out from Kaliabor to Nowgong over a distance of 30 kilometres. When the participants arrived in Nowgong, the cops slapped them with a lathi charge. The police did not arrest women volunteers who were picketing in front of Cotton College in Guwahati for concern that the situation may spiral out of control.

The historic Lahore Congress was convened in 1929, with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as president. In the session, the resolution for independence was passed (Asamiya, 13 April, 1929). It was agreed to commemorate the 26th of January 1930 as India's first Independence Day across the country. As a result, the women of Kaliabor decided to attend the festival in Nowgong, the district headquarters town. Under the leadership of Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain, and Kiranbala Bora, around 400 women marched towards Nowgong. Women from the surrounding villages joined the march as well. When the national flag was set to be hoisted in front of a large crowd on January 26th, the police began attacking the mob. The women were abused and stripped of their national flag. A woman called Kamalabala Kakati was arrested and sentenced to prison in Sibsagar for taking part in such a parade.

Another major goal of the freedom struggle was to abolish untouchability. But untouchability was not a prominent issue in Assam's province. However, the untouchables, also known as Harijans, were not permitted to attend any orthodox Hindu temple. In April 1934, Gandhiji visited on a two-week Harijan tour of Assam. He attended a number of public gatherings held by women in various parts of Assam. In Jorhat, Giribala Devi an orthodox Brahmin lady opened their private family temple to the Harijans in the presence of Gandhiji. Swarnalata Devi, other women from Jorhat was known as "Kasturba (name of Gandhiji's wife of Assam)" for her devotion to the work of Harijan welfare. Many elementary schools and high schools were establish in the Harijan's area where the contributions from the women were noteworthy. Swarnalata Barua of Golaghat district devoted herself to the popularization of Hindi, as it was one of the main agenda in Gandhiji's constructive program.

The congress working committee (CWC) decided in April 1940 to establish a women's wing of the congress at the national and provincial levels, in response to the growing participation of women in the independence effort. As a result, the women's wing in Assam was established in September 1940, with joint secretaries Pushpalata and Amolprova which was another significant step in enlisting the support of more women in the national campaign.

Role of Assamese women in Quit India Movement

The year 1942 was to be a momentous year for the people of Assam as it was to be for other parts of the country. Gandhiji had initiated three struggles to unshackle India from bondage. These were : the Non-cooperation movement (1921), the Civil Disobedience movement (1930) and the Quit India movement (1942). Quit India movement was the third and the last struggle where Gandhiji adopted the slogan 'Do or Die'. In 1939 the great war broke out and tension in the British camp increased after the entrance of Japan into the war at the end of 1941. The rapid advance of the Japanese soldiers through South-east Asia forced all groups to face the impact of an imminent Japanese invasion. China and the United States put pressure on Britain to gain full support of India in its war efforts by granting her demands for an immediate move towards independence. Accordingly Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to India with a proposal that as soon as the war was over steps would be taken to set up an elected body in India to frame a constitution for a new Indian union. It means, it would grant India a dominion status. India was not satisfied with such type of proposals that she would get freedom after the end of the war. Gandhiji called it a "blank cheque on a failing bank."²¹ For Gandhiji, the only possible solution now appeared to be for the British to quit India. The idea had been gradually formulated into the Quit India movement. Quit India movement was the third and the last struggle where Gandhiji adopted the slogan 'Do or Die'. In 1939 the great war broke out and tension in the British camp increased after the entrance of Japan into the war at the end of 1941. The rapid advance of the Japanese soldiers through South-east Asia forced all groups to face the impact of an imminent Japanese invasion. China and the United States put pressure on Britain to gain full support of India in its war efforts by granting her demands for an immediate move towards independence. Accordingly Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to India with a proposal that as soon as the war was over steps would be taken to set up an elected body in India to frame a constitution for a new Indian union. It means, it would grant India a dominion status. India was not satisfied with such type of proposals that she would get freedom after the end of the war. Gandhiji called it a "blank cheque on a failing bank"(Embree: 1980:123). For Gandhiji, the only possible solution now appeared to be for the British to quit India. The idea had been gradually formulated into the Quit India movement. The congress working committee, which met at Wardha on 14th July 1942, discussed Gandhiji's idea of launching a mass movement in the country demanding the immediate withdrawal of the British Power from Indian soil. It adopted a resolution to this effect, which was notified in the All India Congress Committee (AICC) session held in Bombay on 7-8 August 1942 (Chand: 1983:369-76). Immediately, following the adoption of the Quit India resolution, the congress organizations both at the provincial and district levels were asked to gear

themselves up for the movement and to enroll volunteers on a large scale. Non payment of taxes and revenue, anti-war propaganda, general strikes to hamper war production and supply, establishment of a parallel government, 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 obstructive or 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 buildings. Needless to say, those freedom fighters, who had chosen this revolutionary path, had to face untold miseries. Often they walked for days together without a wink of sleep or a morsel of food, exposing their lives to great risks. 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 Gandhiji'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. About the participation of women in these programs the Gopinath Bordoloi Committee report says : What is unique is that, in these daring acts women took an active part and were always in the forefront. Amid such violence caused by the police, Tileswari Mahanta, a daring women volunteer successfully hoisted the national flag at Bihali police station. Besides Darrang district, in some other places like North Lakhimpur, Jorhat etc. attempts were made to hoist the national flag on government buildings. On 15th October 1942, eighty women from the villages near Teok made an abortive attempt to attack the police station without any leader of importance. The women of Borpetta district attacked the Patacharkuchi police station and assaulted the police officer in retaliation to the police firing. 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 the Sibsagar district, Aikan Bhuyan of Mudoijan near Teok took the lead in setting fire to the Amguri High School. She conducted several secret meetings where she reportedly instigated a number of congress youths to damage government properties. While the saboteurs were engaged in their

demolition activities she often volunteered for patrolling duty. The local congress entrusted the task of carrying top secret messages from one place to another to Sudhalata Dutta and Reboti Lahon, who often had to traverse long distances on foot to carry out their duty. Sudhalata Dutta once even covered a distance of 142 kilometer on foot with a child on her lap. During one such errand Reboti Lahon developed pneumonia and breathed her last while walking from Boloma to Ghiladhari. Braving all hazards, the girls in the course of their visits to various places with secret messages also propagated the idea of underground movement, even in the remotest areas of Assam. In Nowgong district Jaymati Saikia cooperated with the revolutionary group to burn the Bebejia road bridge on 25 / 26 August 1942. In that district, girls like Pitrani Saikia and Dagati Bora worked for the security of the underground male workers. Brajnath Sarma's wives, Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi helped their husband and his underground party workers to carry on their sabotage activities by providing them with food and shelter. Ratnabala Phukan, a female member of the death squad, not only took part in the destruction of bridge and the burning down of government buildings but also allowed her house to be used as a center of underground activities. Educated girls belonging to the secret groups were used in transmitting secret circulars and bulletins. Another women, Budheswari Hazarika took an active part in sinking cargo boats carrying military supplies through the Brahmaputra river (Sharma Puzari, R.R. and Mazan, K. :2001:123-24). During the year 1942 complete Police Raj was instituted in Assam and the people were subjected to untold misery. The police were given unlimited 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).

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that with a limited participation in the 1921 phase, the involvement of women in the subsequent phases of the movement became massive in scale and similar in nature to that of the male participants. Countless 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. It was for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were afraid of was

not Gandhiji but the innumerable women of India who became the mouthpiece of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could suppress such an awakening.

Thus beginning with a limited participation in the 1921 phase, the involvement of women in the subsequent phases of the movement became massive in scale and similar in nature to that of the male participants. It was for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were afraid of was not Gandhiji but the innumerable illiterate women of India who became the mouthpiece of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could suppress such an awakening.

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