

ROLE OF ASSAMESE WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT OF INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

The advent of the British East India Company to the Revolt of 1857 was a period where a mere foreign trading company turned itself into a major political force in India. After the transfer of power from British East India Company to the crown in 1858, the colonial rule of the Britishers left a harmful impact on the lives of Indian people resulting anti-imperialist movement in the latter half of 19th century. The intellectual resurgence of India during the century facilitated the rise of modern Indian Nationalism, Assam, situated in the northeastern corner of India was the latest victim of British imperialism. She lost her independent status with the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. However she was one of the earliest one to raise a revolt against the shackles of British rule and join the mainstream of freedom movement. Gandhi's visit in 1921 gave fillip to nationalist movement in Assam. Along with their male counterparts the women of Brahmaputra Valley contributed significantly to the Nationalist Movement in Assam. They made history by sacrificing their homes to free themselves from the domination of the British administration. Their contribution was also marked by the formation of Assam Mahila Samiti, the acquisition of women franchise and their participation in All India Congress Session of 1926 at Pandu. The overwhelming participation of women of Assam in 1930-34 was notable too as their intense devotion to the various programmes was chalked out during this period. In the Quit India Movement the Assamese women of Brahmaputra Valley surpassed all other women in terms of their courage and sacrifice.

So this paper is a humble attempt to highlight the participation of women of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in the national movement.

Introduction:

The freedom movement in India is a glorious chapter of Indian history.¹ It was a mass movement which developed in India as a result of the clash of interest between the British rulers and Indian people. The movement gained momentum under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The Britishers under the aegis of British East India Company was a mere trading Company and within a hundred years, it turned into a major political force in India. After the transfer of power from the British East India Company to the English crown in 1858 they started ruling India independently. Various sections of population felt suffocated under Colonial rule of the Britishers, resulting initially resistance and later intellectual resurgence which facilitated the rise of modern Nationalism. Assam, situated in the North East was one of the last

¹ Neog, Gitimalika, Article-"Bharatar Swadhinota Sangramot Dergaonor Nari, Piyo Sakhi, Guwahati, 2015, pg-40

victims of British Imperialism in India. British started their administration in Assam after the signing of Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. At that time British Indian province of Assam was constituted of six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and two districts of the Surma Valley. In Brahmaputra Valley the movement gained momentum after 1921. From 1921 onwards Assam witnessed the movement in various phases like Non-cooperation movement, Civil-disobedience movement and Quit India movement. The Assamese women of Brahmaputra Valley played a very important and significant role in the freedom movement. Their contribution was not only significant to the history of freedom movement in Assam, but they made history. Along with their counterparts in different parts of India, Assamese women plunged into the national movement, sacrificed their homes for the attainment of country's freedom.

Objectives:

The paper is a humble attempt to highlight the role of Assamese women of Brahmaputra Valley in the various phases of Freedom movement in Assam.

Methodology:

The present study is based on data collected from newspaper, booklets, bulletins, journals, magazines etc. All possible efforts have been made to collect information keeping in mind the subject of the study.

Assamese women prior to Colonial Rule:

Prior to Colonial rule in Assam, the participation of Assamese women in the state polity was restricted only to the members of the royal and noble families. Various Buranji revealed that the first Ahom king Sargodau Sukafa's wife and Barahi girl Henguli Kunwari dedicated her life for the freedom of her land. She was responsible women who by associating with her husband unified the different races and created a greater Assam. Besides the glorious example was also set by a pious woman Mulagabhoru. Apart from the royal and noble family's the rural Assamese women though was seen active in economic matters and had in historical times not hesitated even in joining popular revolts like the Moamoria rebellion in the late eighteenth century. However their lack of modern education prevented them from engaging in public affairs after the British occupation. So in such a socio-economic condition prevailing in Assam before the colonial rule in Assam might never attracted Assamese women to join the arena of politics.

In the other part of India few all India women organization for the advancement of Indian women like Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904) and Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1910) and women Indian Association (1919). Mahila Karmi Samaj in Bengal was that but there was no branch of this association in Assam. But the need for such associations was felt by Assamese women .Five years later the first ever women organization known as Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti came into existence in 1915. The formation of Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti was initiated by Hemoprova Das, headmistress and teacher of the girls' school. Following the example of Dibrugarh, in Sibsagar, Jaymati utsav in 1914 to involve the women and awaken their nationalist sentiments. Simaltenously Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilani (1916),Nowgong Mahila Sanmilani involved themselves in this line of contest. In 1918, Chandraprova Saikiani, who hailed from a backward Village in Kamrupa District and an educated working women became a leader of Non-Cooperation movement moved a resolution during the Tezpur session of the "Asom Chatra Sanmilan" in favour of prohibition of Opium in Assam.

Assamese women in 1920-21 Non-cooperation Movement:

Gandhiji's call for Satyagraha on April 6, 1919 and acceptance of the Non-Cooperation Movement on August 20, 1920 drew a large number of Indian women and they showed keen interest by joining processions, attending meetings, taking up spinning and weaving, propagating the use of Khadi and Charka, boycotting foreign goods and leaving school and college by girls student. The contribution of Women to Gandhis Non-Cooperation went beyond respectable position as Kasturba Gandhi (Gujrat), Basanti Devi (Bengal), Urmila Devi (Bengal), Parbati Devi (Agra), Amnan (Lahore), Sarojini Naidu (Bombay), Uma Nehru (Uttar Pradesh) etc were some remained as the organizers of the Non-cooperation movement at the national level.²

In Assam the participation of the women folk to success of Non-Cooperation Movement was remarkable. Though their participation was not massive in scale and was elitist in character, their contribution to the anti-Colonial struggle was significant in the sense that it provided a lead to the enthusiastic rural women of Assam and prepared them for the forth coming phases of struggle with almost all political leaders. Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 gave a golden opportunity to the women folk of Brahmaputra Valley, particularly the educated section to organize themselves. Women leaders of that phase were mostly from urban area and they received valuable support and backing from stalwarts and brave patriots like Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya and Chandra Kumar Agarwala who plunged into the non-violent struggle. Among the Assamese women it was Bidyutprova Devi, wife of Tarun Ram Phukan who initiated the movement and she received enormous support from Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi, Snehlata Bhattacharya, Guneswari Devi the solidity was shown by the members of the Gauhati district Mahila Samiti and they were the first to welcome the leader like Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi with congratulatory message once they were released from jail.

The lead given by women of Gauhati was soon followed by other Assamese women. As major thrust of women in Assam was in the field of promotion of spinning and weaving a spinning school was started at Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir where big heap of foreign clothes was set ablaze in the compound of the residence of Tarun Ram Phukan before Gandhi. On 8 December 1921 a meeting was held at the residence of Nilkanta Barua a retired government servant in Guwahati who advocated the use of khadi and swadeshi good. The women both from Gauhati and Sibsagar devoted all their valuable ornaments to the Tilak Swaraj Fund.

The Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam mainly Gandhi's visit to Assam gave a great impetus not only to the urban women, but also to the rural women. In Barnagar area, Guneswari Majumder took the initiative in organizing meeting at Kaniobhatha village, where Bishnuram Medhi and other leaders attended. After the meeting huge quantities of foreign clothes were burnt. Bhanumati Talukder of Godabari, Polashbari, who was known as 'Volunteer Rani Bai' by her locality and 'Sorojini' of Assam by Gandhi, a mother of 3 children visited door to door for the popularization of khadi and hand span yarn.

At Tezpur, the Tezpur Mahila Samiti was the chief forum of the women of the erstwhile Darrang district. Chandraprova Saikiani, Kironmayee Agarwala, Kironbala Borkakoty, Sarala Das, to name only a few took the lead of the women of Tezpur during the

² Goswami, Chandana :Nationalism in Assam, Mittal Publication, 2008, pg-125

Non- Co-operation Movement. Likewise the Assamese women, labour class in the tea gardens took an active part in making the temperance movement successful. A glaring example was shown by a tea garden woman of Lalmati Tea estate of Sonitpur District, named Moongi alias Maloti Mem, who laid down her life for the cause of the temperance movement in 1921.

Participation of women covering the phases 1923-1929:

This phase was marked by the formation of Assam Mahila Samiti, the acquisition of women's franchise, participation of 1926 All India Congress Session at Gauhati. Assam Mahila Samiti was formed in 1926 for upliftment of the Assamese society, primarily of the women and children in respect of cultural, economic, education arena. From Dhubri, Goalpara, Jorhat, Nagaon, Golaghat. The AMS with its main office at Gauhati contributed indirectly to making the idea of a women organization acceptable to the nationalistic political circles.³The Assamese women mainly the workers of Congress party undertook responsibility of the production of required quantity of Khadi to decor the huge pandal of the Congress session of Gauhati. This act of Assamese women who by producing Khadi provided their sense of duty to the nation and patriotism.

Participation in Civil Disobedience Movement:

The 1930-34 phase of Civil Disobedience Movement was a period of women awakening. Jawaharlal Nehru in his 'Discovery of India' remarks that women came to the front and took charge of the struggle, where all the men folk were in prison. The women volunteers consisting of 600, including Kamala Nehru, Sarojini Naidu participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement in Delhi. In Assam, the launching of historic Dandi in March 1930 was celebrated by the women folk of Brahmaputra Valley. They organized meetings in different places particularly in Sibsagar, Goalpara, Nowgong and Golaghat.

Following the declaration of Lahore Congress of 1930, a woman force of Bahini was formed at Golaghat under the leadership of Swarnalata Barua, Mohini Rajkumari, Mohini Gohain and Basantalata Hazarika. The picketing organized by the women in front of the shops dealing in wine, opium etc struck terror into the hearts of even the British imperialist rulers. The women in Assam irrespective of status took processions, held meetings, picketed liquor, opium and foreign cloth shops. In the course of participation of these activities they face police lathi charge, courted arrest and suffered imprisonment. Guneswari Devi and Muktabala Baishnav were the first Assamese were to undergo imprisonment for violation of government order and for participation in Civil Disobedience Movement. Dariki Das, an opium worker of this period and martyr left behind the example of women devotion to this program.

Apart from Guneswari Devi, Lilabati Kakoti of Sibsagar, Sundaribali Kakoti, Bidyabala Vaishnav of Golaghat contributed a lot in creating national consciousness among the women in Assam. One of the centres of picketing was Cotton College which was gathered by the woman volunteers. The brave women Durgaprova Bora, Basantalata Hazarika, Ghana Kanti Devi and Srimati Bhubeneswari Devi formed and impenetrable barrier in front of Cotton College. Apprehension that situation might go beyond contact, the government dared not to put them under arrest. In 1930 General Secretary of Panbazar Girls' School, Student Union

³ Mahanta, Aparna :Journey of Assamese Women :1836-1937, Assam Publication Board, 2008, pg-95

Pushpalata Das, one of the prominent leaders of the freedom movement in Assam, set up a revolutionary organization called the 'Mukti Sangha' in the premises of Kamrup Mahila Samiti.

Assamese Women prior to Quit India Movement:

In the 30th September of 1940 Gandhiji himself led the movement of offering individual Satyagraha. During the third phase of individual Satyagraha, few women from Assam openly joined the movement. Pushpalata Das, Maniprabha Das of Goalpara, Subhadra Devi from Barpeta, Dubhagi Devi from Mongaldoi, Jaylata Dowarah from Dibrugarh, Jugaprabha Devi from Jorhat, Swarnalata Barua Amalprova Das, Chandra prabha Saikiani etc women volunteers' successfully participated in the individual Satyagraha and encouraged many of them towards this programme. In the 15th April of 1940, a special session of the Congress was held at Wardha. At the Congress Session it decided to set up a women's wing. Therefore women in Assam sent a proposed to Dr Rajendra Prasad, the President of All India Congress party to set up a similar department in Assam. As a result in the 19th of September, 1940 'Asom Mahila bibhag' was opened where Pushpalata Das and Amalprobha Das were appointed as joint secretaries. To increase the popularity of Swadeshi goods 'Assam Mahila bibhag' started opening new, weaving Sangha or club in various places of Assam. Besides in 1941 and 42 they also engaged themselves for the services of those who were affected by the world war. Amalprobha Das and Sudhalata Dutta from upper Assam took leading part in this affair. In 1941, Pushpalata Das who was appointed as the General Secretary of 'Sadou Asom Chatri Sanmilani' session which was recognised as a branch of the All India Girl's Association.

Assamese Women and Quit India Movement:

Quit India movement was the last phase of the freedom struggle of India. The declaration of 'Quit India' in 1942 by the Indian National Congress and Gandhiji's slogan "Do or Die" had a galvanising effect upon the course of movement in Brahmaputra Valley. Supporting this large number of Assamese women came out to join this movement with the preparedness to face any eventuality that might come in the way of attaining the independence of India. The first initiative was taken by Darrang district (present Sonitpur district) Congress committee who hoisted the national flag on the police station and the court building which was the symbol of British authority. Here two groups 'Mrityu Bahini' and 'Shanti Bahini' came into existence. 'Mrityu Bahini' included those of the age group of 18 to 50 who would willingly face death at any moment. Whereas 'Shanti Bahini' which included the adult who would sacrifice their life for the struggle. Mention may be made of the brave Assamese young girl Kanaklata Baruah from Sonitpur District who being a member of 'Mrityu Bahini' became a martyr on 20th Sept along with Mukunda Kakati in Gahpur in police firing. At Dhekiajuli, police fired up on Kumali Devi, Tileswari Baruah.⁴ Pushpalata Das was joined and many of her colleagues were put under house arrest at Barhampur, Nagaon. The 65 years old Bhugeshwari Phukanani was shot dead while she tried to protect the honour of her granddaughter Ratnamala. In Barpeta District, the women's role in 1942 was significant and enthusiastic. After the Jalah firing, on 25th September, and the killing of Madanchandra Barman and Rautaram Boro, thousands of women assembled and attacked the Patacharkuchi police station. Chandraprova Saikiani was the sole guiding force behind the great women's upheaval in Barpeta. On

⁴ Medhi Mahanta, Gayatri- 'Participation of Assamese women in the Quit India Movement' ACTA Journal, Vol-XXXV, 2011-12, Pg-208,209

September 8, 1942 Punyaprova Hazarika of Golaghat succeeded in planting the national flag in the Thana compound. At Bihali also Tileswari Mahanta, a daring women volunteer, successfully hoisted the flag at Bihali Thana. During the year 1942, complete police raj was instituted in Assam and the people were subjected to untold misery. More particularly, the suffering of the women of the Assam, during the 1942-43 periods, crossed all limits. According to the "Bordoloi Committee Report on atrocities Committed in 1942", at least eight women of the Brahmaputra Valley were victim of such molestation. On this situation women of Assam became involve in underground and extremist activities. One such underground activist was Annaprova Barua of Golaghat, who undertook such activities following her extremist husband Sankar Chandra Baruah. Annaprova Baruah trained and organized the women of interior rural area to carry out supervise activities. Such trained underground female workers were Rebati Lahon. Abalikuchumi, Jaymati Saikia ,Enamai Bora, Budheswari Hazarika, Daibaki Das, Panilata Das, Ratnabala Phukan and Aihan Bhuyan. This very fact, rules that in 1942 upheaval, the women of Assam perhaps surpassed all other women of the country, in terms of their courage and sacrifice. Their remarkable contribution towards the attainment of Swaraj for India is a landmark in the history of Assam. The Quit India, phase of movement in Assam was marked by struggle and sufferings of women. Beating, slapping, kicking, insulting during night hours and misbehaving with the women folk etc were the common methods adopted by the police and military force for the suppression of the womenfolk. But inspite of all the sufferings women, bravely carried out the movement in Brahmaputra Valley.

Conclusion:

The Assamese women of Brahmaputra Valley by participating on the freedom movement attained a respectable position and their power will always remain golden in the history of Assam. Their participation and involvement in the different phases of the movement portrayed their courage, devotion, sacrifice and patriotism. Being Indian, they wholly wedded themselves to the ideal of Indian Nationalism. From the formation of 'Assam Mahila Samiti' to Quit India movement the Assamese women of Brahmaputra Valley played a heroic role and contributed substantially towards the success of the movement. But it is a matter of regret that, inspite of their heroic contribution towards the success of different programmes of the freedom movement in Assam, they did not received due recognition from the people and the power. However there is a hope that heroic sacrifice of the Assamese women in the freedom movement will inspire the succeeding generation to love their motherland whole heartedly.

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