



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.71 (SJIF 2021)

Contribution of the Assamese Women in the Freedom Movement with Special Reference to the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2022-62944995/IRJHIS2201003>

Abstract:

In any organized mass movement around the globe women's contribution and role cannot be undermined. In the freedom struggle of our nation, Assamese women played a tremendous role and many of them have sacrificed their lives to the noble cause of the nation. However, till 1915 there was no organized movement or women's participation in social and political fields of Assam. The formation of Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in 1915 marked the beginning of women's organization in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

The emergence of Gandhiji in the India's political scene, his tremendous confidence in women's capability and his high inspiration of the women of Assam, encouraged the women to fight for the cause of the nation. Gandhiji's visit to Assam in 1921 gave enough sense of self-confidence to the women and they were dawn to the national political life by his charismatic personality.

The present study is an attempt to bring out the role played by women of Assam especially in the Brahmaputra Valley in different phases of the freedom moment of India from 1921 – 1942.

Keywords: *Women, contribution, Freedom Movement, Assamese.*

Introduction:

Women constitute nearly half of the total population of the World. They have their laudable contribution in different socio-political movements around the globe. 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 the Indian women during freedom movement for the attainment of *Swaraj* for India. Along with the rest of her sisters, Assamese women too fought for the noble cause of our nation.

Objectives:

The present study is a humble attempt to investigate the role of the Assamese women, especially the women of Brahmaputra valley*of Assam in the Indian's freedom struggle. It is tried to study the role played by Assamese women in different phases of freedom movement of our nation.

Methodology:

The study is mainly based on official documents, newspapers, booklets and bulletins of freedom movement, souvenirs, Government publications and such other relevant publications. All possible efforts have been made to collect information keeping in mind the subject of study.

**Includes the then districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh Sibsagar, Darrang, Nowgong, Kamrup & Goalpara*

Discussion and Analysis:

The role of the women of Assam in the freedom movement has its background in their past heritage. During Ahom period women belonging the royal and noble families took part in the matters related to state politics. (Sharma, 1993, P2). In 1857, first of its kind against Britishers, rebellion took place in Meerut, Maniram Dewan a brave Assamese, and few of his friend started to planned attack on the British Indian troops stationed at Dibrugarh. Rupali Aidue and Lumbai Aidue, two women from the royal families, had to suffer confiscation of property because of their alleged involvement in the rebellion. The first Assamese women to suffer in the hands of British for a national cause. (Dutta, 1968, P 25) They were the female members of Kandarpeswar Singha's family.

The women of Assam started to organize themselves from the year 1915 onwards. The first ever women's organization of Assam was formed in Dibrugarh in 1915 namely, *Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti*. The initiative of the formation of this Samiti was taken by Hemaprova Das, and a few other women of Dibrugarh. Similar association was formed the women of Nowgaonin 1917. The main objective of these associations was to upliftment of the Assamese society, primarily of the women and children in the respect of cultural, economic and educational matters. The *Samities* also showed great interest of the constructive programmes of Gandhiji which was used as a major tool of non-cooperation movement. However, till 1926, the women of Assam were not organized at the provincial level, but they contributed tremendously to the freedom movement either through their local associations or individually.

Women of Assam in 1920 -21 Non-Cooperation Movements (NCM):

The special session of the Congress held in Calcutta in Sept. 1920, decided the path of constitutional agitation for the attainment of *Swaraj*. Gandhiji call for non-cooperation with the British India Government. Women throughout India responded to it. They participated in the movement by way of joining procession, attending meeting, weaving, propagating the use of *khadi* and charkha, by cutting foreign goods and leaving schools and colleges by the girls' students. By and large their participation was through the various women organizations at different levels or through the Committees of Indian National Congress.

In Assam, the organizational activities of women began even before the commencement of the NCM. But the prevalence of the conservatism stood in the way of their large scale open

participation in the movement.(Sharma,1973, p88) However the wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of the leaders and workers of Indian National Congress , though small in number, came out to participate in the 1921-22 movement ignoring the social restrictions. (Devi, 1976, p-8) In January 1921, a group of women of Guwahati proposed to take out procession to violate Sec.144 and court arrest as part of the movements programme. The initiative was taken by Bidyutprova Devi, wife of Tarun Ram Phukan, however, at Gandhiji's advice called off that programme.

Gandhiji's visit to Assam in August, 1921, provided great encouragement to the women of Assam. On 18th August,1921, the day of Gandhiji's arrival at Guwahati a big meeting was held in Guwahati where a large number of women participated. Bidyutprova Devi, Hemantakumari Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharyya, Guneswari Devi, enrolled as congress volunteers. (Sharma,1993, p50)

In the 1921-22 Non-Cooperation Movement, the major thrust of women in Assam was in the field of promotion of spinning and weaving. Women of Assam irrespective of class, caste and status, used to weave for themselves and for their family members; weaving was a part of a women's day to day activity. Thus, spinning and weaving of *Khadi* as a part of Non-Cooperation Movement drew a large number of Assamese women to it. In respect of spinning and weaving, perhaps the women of Assam occupied the topmost position in terms of number of participants throughout India. (Ramdhenu, 9th issue)

The effort on the part of the women of different places of Assam and the participation by a section of women in 1921 phase of the movement paved the way for the development of the *Assam Mahila Samiti* (ASM) at the provincial level in 1926. The formation of the provincial organization was a landmark in the history of women's organization in Assam. It afforded a common platform for the women of the province to ventilate their views and assert their political and social rights.

Chandraprava Saikiani, Sashibala Changkakati, Padmawatidevi Phukanani, Snehalata Bhattacharyya, Guneswari Mazumdar, Kironmayee Agarwala, Sarala Das, Kironbala Barkakati, Rebati Bora, Nirmalprona Saika., Hemoprova Das, Nirmala Devi, Gunada Khaund, Aideu Rajkhowa and host of women in different parts of the province of Assam participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement. They spread the message of Gandhiji among the women and took up spinning and weaving and also urged women to take up the same. Women in large number participated in picketing and processions.

Assamese Women during 1923-29:

The period between 1923 to 1929, there was a kind of renaissance among the women of Assam. The formation of *Assam Mahila Samiti*, the acquisition of women franchise, participation in the holding of 1926 All India Congress session at Gauhati and undertaking of numerous reform works were some of the achievements of the women of Assam during this period. In spite of such developments in the organizational activities, the AMS could not reach the desired prominence at the

All India level. The reason for this were mainly the lack of publicity and proper means of communication and poor knowledge of Assam and her society in the rest of India.

Civil Disobedience Movement and Assamese Women:

In the 1930– 1934 phase, women throughout India came to the forefront of the movement. At the beginning of the 1930 phase of Civil Disobedience, the movement could make little headway in the Brahmaputra valley due to various reasons. One such important reason was that people of Assam could not join the Dandi March directly as Dandi was very far from the province. However, on 12th March, 1930, the day of launching the Dandi March by Gandhi, the people of Kaliabor of Nowgong district symbolically march from Kaliabor to Nowgong, a distance of about 30 miles. Similar procession took out in Sibsagar also.

The women of Assam irrespective of status and position came out in hundreds and thousands to participate in the programme. They took out processions called *prabhatpheris* held meetings, organized processions, 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 Baishnabi were the first Assamese women to undergo imprisonment for violation of Government order and for participating in the Civil Disobedience movement (Sharma, 1993, p97). They were treated as ‘B’ class prisoners (APCC Report for 1930). The large-scale participation by the women of the Brahmaputra valley in this phase of movement indicated their identification with the ideals and ethos of the national movement. What was more significant was that an overwhelming majority of the women participants in this phase were from the rural background having no knowledge of even three ‘R’. Dariki Das, an opium worker of this period and a martyr, left behind the example of women’s devotion to this programme.

Since no women of Assam could join the Dandi March, they decided to demonstrate their solidarity with the programme of Salt *Satyagraha* by organizing meetings in different places for arousal of greater awareness among women. The women of Goalpara held a meeting with Mohini Devi as the president, few days before launching the *Satyagraha*, to extend whole-hearted support to it and appealed the women to participate in different programmes of the movement.

Basantalata Hazarika, Kamala Devi, Ratnabala Bora, Mukyaprabha Agarwala, Sumitrabala Bhattacharyya, Anna Baruah, Durgaprova Bora, Ghanakanti Devi, Bhubaneswri Devi, Swarnalata Saikia, Pupalata Saikis (Das), Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain, Kiranbala Bora were important women figure in this phase of movement who played their leadership role.

The Women Department of the APCC was constituted on 19th Sept. 1940 (Mitra & Chakravarty, 1946, p5) with Pupalata Saikia and Amalprova Das as Joint Secretaries. Soon after formation of the Department, both the Secretaries toured almost all the districts of the province and addressed a large number of women meetings. In Upper Assam, Annaprova Barua and Sudhalata

Datta worked extensively for opening a string organization under the Women's Department. The opening of the Women's Department in the A.P.C.C. was an important step in the direction of drawing the women closer to the Congress. In reality, the activities of women's organizations were merged with those of the Congress with the formation of Women's Wing within the Congress.

Contribution of Assamese Women during Quit India Movement:

The 'Quit India' movement drew the largest number of women to the forefront of the movement. They came out to join the movement with the preparedness to face any eventuality that might come in the way of attaining the independence of India. At least thirteen (13) women of the Brahmaputra valley, in the age group of 13 to 65 years, had laid down their lives in the Quit India Movement and many of women faced severed tortured in the hands of police. The women of this region perhaps surpassed all other women of the country in terms of their courage and sacrifice in the 1942 'do or die' phase of movement. Mention may be made the brave Assamese woman Kanaklata Baruah who became a martyr on 20th Sept. along with Mukunda Kakati in Gohpur in police open firing. Hers was an example of the spirit of Sacrifice and patriotism. On the same day in Dhekiajuli police fired about 29 rounds of bullets causing death and injuries to many men and women (Nath,1973, p68). Kumali Devi and Jaluki Kacharian, Tileswari Barua of Dhekiajuli died as a result of bullet injury on 20th Sept. 1942. Mungri alias Malati of Darrang; Kanaklata Barua, Gahpur, Darrang; Bhogeswari Phukanani, Nowgong; Khahili Devi, Dhekiajulu, Darrang; Golapi Chutiani, Dhekiajuri, Darrang; Padumi Gogoi, Dhekiajuri, Darrang; Abali Kuchini, Mahanta, Nowgong; Lila Neogoni, Lakhimpur; Rebati Lahan, Teok, Sibsagar; Kon Chutiani, Dhekiajuri, Darrang; were women freedom fighters of Assam who sacrificed their lives in the 1942 Quit India Movement for the noble cause of our nation as per history records (Sharma,2013,p.245-247). More over hundreds of women injured in police firing and *lathi* charge in the last phase of India's freedom struggle.

One could say feel inclined to say that the 'Quit India' phase of the movement in Assam was very substantially a struggle waged by her womanhood. With the arrest of Congress leaders in the province, the women bravely carried out the movement in Assam by bearing the brunt of the wrath of the *Raj*. The protest against British oppression was demonstrated by the women in their thousands by taking out processions, and by holding meetings and demonstrations. Chandraprov Saikiani, Puspallata Das, Amolprova Das, Saruplata Das, Hemaprova Das were leading women figure who hold meetings at different places of Assam against British *Raj*. At their initiative 'Anti-Imperialist Day' was observed at Pathsala of present Barpeta district on 4th, 5th, & 6th January, 1943.

Conclusion:

The role played by the women of Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the freedom movement is a story of their devastation, sacrifice and patriotism. It will go down in the history of Assam as one of the most remarkable contributions towards the attainment of *Swaraj*. The women of Assam in

their heart to hearts were Indians and were wholly wedded to the ideal of Indian nationalism. The women of this part of Assam demonstrated their loyalty to the nation.

It is a matter of regret that in spite of self-less contributions made by the women of the Brahmaputra valley towards the success of different programmes of the freedom movement in Assam, their sacrifice and sufferings did not receive due recognition from the people and the powers that be. Even the Assamese women freedom fighters did not get their place in the photo gallery of the freedom fighters of India in the train, namely, Freedom Express, launched by the Government of India in 2007, on the occasion of 50 years of India's Independence. Hence, both the Union Govt. as well as State Govt. should laud their sacrifice and give due recognition.

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Annexure: I

List of the women Freedom Fighters of Assam who sacrificed their lives in India's struggle for independence (1921 – 1942)

1. Mungri alias Malati Mem, Lalmati, Darrang: killed by government supporters at Lalmati in Darrang district in 1921 for helping the congress volunteers in their Prohibition campaign.
2. Dariki Dasi, Golaghat: Took active part in 1930 Civil Disobedience movement – an active anti-opium worker – arrested and jailed for anti-opium picketing- she was pregnant at the time of imprisonment- refused to take conditional release from jail- fell ill and died in the jail hospital at Sibsagar on 26.4.1932.
3. Kanaklata Baruah, Gahpur, Darrang: An active organizer and a member of the Mrityu Bahani. She led the procession to the Gahpur police station for hoisting the national flag thereon- got bullet injury in the police firing and died immediately on 20.9.1942.
4. Bhogeswari Phukanani, Nowgong: Active woman organizer of Brahampur got bullet injury while confronting a police officer on 18.9.1942 at Brahampur – died 3 (three) days later.

5. Tileswary Baruah, Dhekiajuli, Darrang: Active participant –got bullet injury in the Dhekiajuli Police firing on 20.9.1942 and died on the same day.
6. Khahuli Devi, Dhekiajuli, Darrang : Active participant of 1942 - died as result of bullet injury in the Dhekiajuli Police firing on 20.9.1942- she pregnant at that time.
7. Kumali Devi, Dhekiajuli, Darrang : Active participant of 1942- got bullet injury in the Dhekiajuli police firing on 20.9.1942 and died immediately.
8. Golapi Chutiani, Dhekiajuli, Darrang: Active participant of 1942-injured in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on 20.9.1942- succumbed to the injuries few days later.
9. Thunuiki Das, Dhekiajuli, Darrang: active participant of 1942-injured in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on 20.9.1942 succumbed to the injuries few days later.
10. Jaluki Kacharan, Dhekiajuli, Darrang : Active participant of 1942- got bullet injury in the Dhekiajuli police firing on 20.9.1942- died soon after owing to her injury on the left shouder.
11. Padumi Gogoi, Dhekiajuli, Darrang: Active participant of 1942-wounded in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on 20.9.1942- arrested and jailed for six months released from jail with worn out health and died soon later.
12. Abdul Kuchuni (Medhi), Manaha, Nowgong: Active participant of 1942-succumbed to police beating at Mahana in 1942 within a fortnight of the attack. She was pregnant at that time.
13. Lila Neogoni, Lakhimpur, Active participant of 1940-42- severely beaten by police at Lakhimpur while participating in a procession in October 1942-died as a result of the injury after two months.
14. Rebati Lahon, Teok, Sibsagar: Active participant of 1940-42 –active organizer-arrested and jailed in 1943- suffered from pneumonia while undergoing imprisonment due to poor living condition in the jail-came out from jail with broken health and died soon for the same ailment.
15. Kon Chutiani, Dhekiajuli, Darrang: active participant of 1942- injured in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli Police station on 20.9.1942-succumbed to the injuries few days later.
16. Sister-in-law of Niren Bhuyan (a Congress worker of North Lakhimpur) was kicked by some police officer while searching for congress workers at her residence. She was at her advance stage of pregnancy at that time and died soon after as a result of brutal treatment by police.