



The Role of Assamese Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle: A Brief Historical Analysis

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Citation: Popy Pegu, (2023), The Role of Assamese Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle: A Brief Historical Analysis, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(4), 3709-3712

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i4.8372

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This study explores the pivotal contributions of Assamese women to India's freedom struggle (1920-1947). Despite societal constraints, Assamese women played multifaceted roles: nationalists, revolutionaries, social reformers, and cultural preservationists. They challenged British colonialism, promoted nationalism, and empowered local communities. Key figures like Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani and Chandraprabha Saikiani inspired generations. This article analyzes primary sources, archival records, and oral narratives to highlight their struggles, strategies, and sacrifices. The study underscores the significance of Assamese women's participation in shaping India's independence movement.

KEYWORDS: Assamese Women, Indian freedom struggle, Nationalists, Revolutionaries, Cultural Preservationists

INTRODUCTION

From the ancient period the women of India had been taking active part in politics. In the period of Vedas, women like Gargi and Maitrayee played active role in Indian politics. In the following period during the reign of the Sultanates and the Mughals women like Sultana Razia and Nurjahan looked after the administration of the empire. But 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 favourable for womanhood to take part in the political sphere.

It has been rightly observed that though Assam was one of the latest victims of British imperialism in India, her independent status being lost only with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, she was also one of the earliest to rise in revolt against the shackles of foreign rule and join the mainstream of the country's movement for freedom. The glorious history of our country's struggle for freedom can be traced as far back as the Revolt of 1857, yet in a very real sense, the first nation-wide movement for freedom with a broad, popular base began only in the year 1921 - the year Gandhiji set the nation on the path of non-co-operation. It was this movement that revealed the spiritual power of Indian womanhood, and the Assamese Women, too, came forward to share that glory.

But, even long, before that, the Assamese Women, accustomed to value the freedom of their land even above their lives had the glorious tradition of Ramani Gabharu and Mula Gabharu who had taken up arms to safeguard the honour of a throne concreted by the bloody sacrifice of Sati Jaymati. That glorious tradition was further enriched by the heroic sacrifices of young women like Rangili and Padumi. The same heroism was also evinced in repulsing the frequent invasions made by Pathan and Mughal invaders.

But the Assamese women, too, like the Rani of Jhansi whose dream of a united and free India did not come true even after her sacrifice of life on the battle field, had to wait till the advent of a man whose magic call could rouse an entire nation from the state of sleepy forgetfulness. That man was Mahatma Gandhi. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was established. It provided a common forum for the meeting of people from all parts of the country and formulation of a common program of activity for freedom struggle. It was from this platform that M.K. Gandhi started his first Non-cooperation movement in the form of "Satyagraha". The two major elements of "Satyagraha" were truth and non-violence. He defined it to be soul force, or love force, the force which is born out of truth and non-violence. The "Satyagrahi" would refuse to do whatever he considered to be wrong. He would remain peaceful under any circumstances and instigations. He would resist

evil but would not hate the evildoer. He would keep truth not by inflicting suffering on the opponent but by accepting suffering himself. He hoped, thereby, to arise the conscience of the evildoer. To achieve success the Satyagrahi must utterly give up fear, hatred and falsehood. According to him passive resistance was a weapon of the weak while Satyagraha was the weapon of the strong. The steps to be followed in the "Satyagraha" were suggested by Gandhiji in the following way to make the movement successful:

- Surrender of titles and all honorary offices under the government
- Withdrawal of children from schools and colleges
- Boycott of law courts by lawyers and litigants
- Refusal of candidates to stand for election in the new legislative councils and of voters to vote
- Boycott of foreign goods

NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT:

So far as the role of Indian women in Non-cooperation movement was concerned it can be said that up to 1930 the entry of women into the Freedom movement was a limited few. Up to this time, a few women, mostly from the families of the national leaders like C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru or some college students in the large cities had taken part in public political demonstrations. That is why in the "Young India" on 30th April, 1930 Gandhiji had appealed to Indian women to take up spinning of yarn on the "charkha", and to come out of their household seclusion and picket government institutions and shops selling foreign goods or liquor. As a result more and more women joined the movement and courted arrest. 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. 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.

The immortal contribution made by this great soul lay in his preaching of the path of Satyagraha which meant abiding by truth even if it meant self-imposed sufferings: a non-co-operation with injustice even by being the victim of oppression. It was with such determination that the people all over the country stood up heroically against the British Empire, where the sun never set, in the year 1921. To Gandhiji, the loom was the symbol of the peoples self dependence and freedom. Gandhiji found the quintessence of the vital power represented by the loom in Assam. That's why, seated on the lap of Tezpur or the historical Sonitpur that commands an enchanting view of the mighty Brahmaputra, Mahatma Gandhi, in his article entitled "Lovely Assam" and wrote "The women of Assam weave dreams of fairyland into the texture of their clothes. Every woman in Assam is by nature an artist." Gandhiji wrote this from his own experience.

The year 1921 saw a number of Assamese stalwarts jump into the non-violent struggle for freedom. They were Karmavir Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Deshbhakta Tarun Ram Phookan, Agnikavi Kamalaknat Bhattacharya and Chandra Prasad Agarwalla, the illustrious poet of "Pratima under the leadership of these brave patriots, all able-bodied women took part in the struggle. Women leaders like the late Hemanta Kumari Devi Bardoloi, poetess Nalinibala Devi, the late Bijut Phookan, the late Sumitra Bhattacharya, the late Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Snehalata Devi Baruah, the late Chandra Prabha Saikiani, and Shrijuta Rajabala Das, who was the Secretary of Dibrugarh Women's Congress Committee of those days all these women leaders undertook extensive tours from village to village to educate and inspire the people. The massive response to the non-co-operation movement in Assam was largely due to the work done by these women leaders.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

In the struggle that followed during the year 1930-31, the Assamese women took a leading part with the young generations of the land. A women's force Bahini was formed at Golaghat under the leadership of Shrimati Swarnalata Barua, Raj Kumari Mohini Gohain and the late Basantalata Hazarika. The picketing organized by these women in front of the shops dealing in wine, opium, etc. struck terror into the hearts of even the British imperialist rulers. The women volunteers who participated in the picketing organized in front of the Cotton College at Guwahati were the late Basantalata Hazarika, the late Sashi Prabha Hazarika, the late Mukta Prabha Agarwalla, the late Durgaprabha Bora, the late Ghanakanti Devi and Shrimati Bhubaneswari Devi. Even though these brave women formed into an impenetrable barrio in front of the Cotton College, the Government dared not put them under arrest for fear that the situation might go beyond their control.

But the mass uprising that had occurred under the leadership of the late Chandra Prabha Saikiani at Nowgong, led to the arrests of the Saikiani, the late Guneswari Devi, the late Muktabala Baishnabi, Mohini Gohain, the late Dariki Kachari and others. The arrests of these women proved to be a source of further inspiration to the movement which spread over the nook and corner of Assam. The first Assamese woman to undergo imprisonment was the late Guneswari Devi, wife of Gunesh Chandra Barthakur of Jakhalabandha. She shouldered the leadership of the Nowgong women after the late Chandra Prabha Saikiani had left for Barpeta and spent a year and a half in jail. While confined in Tezpur jail, she fell seriously ill but eventually recovered from her illness. But her colleague, Dariki Kachari met her death in jail because of an attack of

cholera and thus left her impact in the history of freedom movement. This became a golden chapter of sacrifices in our history.

In the non-co-operation movement of 1921, it was the women who helped saving the lives of the Satyagrahis by begging from door to door. Again, in 1930-31, it was the funds collected by the women and the girls that fed the congress workers. One also recalls here the unparalleled sacrifices made by Mangri or Malati, a woman belonging to the labourer community of Misamari tea estate, who became a victim of secret murder because of her dedication to the ideals of non-violence.

QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

In 1940, Gandhiji himself led the movement of offering individual Satyagraha, and no one could offer such Satyagraha without his permission. Being favoured with his permission, a few of us had the honour of participating in this movement. Among those who courted arrest at that time for raising their voice against co-operating with the British regimes in its war effects either with men or with money, were Shrimati Swarnalata Baruah, with two, women, volunteer from Golaghat, Shrimati Amal Prabha Das, Chandra Prabha Saikiani etc.. It was possibly beyond the dream of the ruling authorities that the Individual Satyagraha launched in 1940-41 would, just after a year, assume stormy proportions. The arrests of Gandhiji and the members of the Congress working Committee together with Gandhiji's call "Do or Die", soon had a galvanizing effect upon the course of the movement. There were country-wide arrests of leaders, including the members of the movement - the executive committee of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee. Both Tyagavir Hem Chandra Baruah and Omeo Kumar Das were bedridden and the Assamese freedom fighters had to choose their own leaders from among themselves. At this stage Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla himself met Omeo Kumar Das at his house to decide upon the future programme. Omeo Kumar Das told Jyoti Prasad, "I am bed-ridden, but she will remain with you. You will shoulder my responsibilities".

The programme drafted by Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla was discussed in the presence of the Satradhikar of Nikamul Satra, Shrijut Gahan Chandra Goswami Dev, and the young worker, Shri Viswadev Sarma. The programme was accepted with some modification. It was decided that the Satyagraha's would be divided into two groups-one would be called "Death Force", the other, "Peace Force". The former would include only those of the age of 18 to 50 who would face death smilingly; and the latter would include any willing adult. The members of the Peace Force would work towards maintaining peace and order in villages which had been subjected to military oppression. We came across only a few persons who were willing to join the Death Force, but the few workers whom we found left an indelible mark on the history of our country. At first we were opposed to enlist the name of Kanaklata on the plea that she was too young; but her fiery zeal compelled us to include her in the list. Her undaunted, heroic words are still ringing in my ears: "I'm not afraid of the bullets of the police I will die to uphold the honour of the flag. Please allow me to lead the procession at Gahpur, yourself leading at Dhekiajuli; I will not allow the flag to be disgraced." Kanaklata kept her word even at the cost of her young life.

At Dhekiajuli, police fired upon Kumali Nath Kakati, Tileswari Devi and Padumi Nath. When Tileswari and Padumi Nath became senseless at the torture of the police, several volunteers came forward to snatch away the rifle from the police. We came to learn about this only later on, since we had already been jailed when this incident took place. It was at this time that the late Purnada Devi and other colleagues at Tezpur had been put under arrest. One also recalls here the sacrifices made by many brilliant female students at that time. At Barhampur, Nowgong, 65 years old Bhogeswari Phukanani was shot dead while she tried to protect the honour of her granddaughter, Ratnamala, from whose hands the military had snatched away the congress flag.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we find that in all the major movements for freedom, the women of Assam always played their heroic roles and contributed substantially towards the success of the movement. It was for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that what they were afraid of was not Gandhiji, but of the innumerable illiterate women of India who became the mouth piece of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could suppress such an awakening. The Assamese women, like their sisters over the rest of the country, fully justified the faith Gandhiji had reposed in them they really proved that women are the true incarnations of spiritual power.

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