Participation of Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle of India: An Exemplary Success

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Abstract
The state of Assam is also not left behind where women have enjoyed equal rights with men since ancient times. In this part of the country women have earned the status of symbol of strength. They have shown their strength in the freedom movement of the country. Women power of Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani and Khahuli Nath is the best example in the history of Assam. During the first part of twentieth century when the wave of women up rise was blowing in the country and Mahatma Gandhi started non-cooperation movement against the British rule, the women from Assam took leading part in the struggle. Even Gandhi had expressed his view that in non-cooperation movement women's participation was more important than that of the men, because they were the symbol of strength. His message encouraged the womenfolk of Assam to come out of the four walls of their homes and participate in social and political activities.

Keywords:

Introduction
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Objectives
The objective of this paper is to emphasize on the role played by Assamese women before and during independence period. Their equal and bold role had minimize the grip of patriarchy and made these women admired in the framework of whole of India.

Methodology
The methodology used in the making of this paper is secondary and data has been collected from articles, newspaper, books and websites.

Contribution Made By Assamese Women In Freedom Struggle
The women of India had been taking active part in politics from the ancient period; 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. In 1920, Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi started the Non–cooperation movement as an only instrument to expel the British from India who had occupied the country in 1757 AD as a result of the battle of Plassey and ruled for nearly 200 years. Right from the days of consolidation and expansion of the British imperialists design in India, a feeling of uncompromising and anti–imperialism prevailed in the country. The East India Company – a British commercial company who had established rule in India was mainly concerne d with making profit. They were primarily motivated to maximize profit through minimum capital investment. So it was a period of exploitation of local resources and expansion of private business. The people of India tried to resist it from its inception. The first big resistance of its kind came in the form of a revolt in 1857. Though it was the first great struggle of the people of India for gaining freedom from British imperialism yet it failed due to the organizational weakness. 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 “Satyagraha” 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 purify the conscience of the evildoer.

During this period the Assamese women participated in the movement through the Assam Chatra Sammilan (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. Large number of women joined the movement by participating in meetings, organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Under the 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 Nanibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Rajabala Das etc. It was not an easy task to convince the common people the need of a movement to expel the British Raj, the people who could not think of any alternative to it. 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.

During the period of Civil Disobedience movement in 1930 some girl students of Assam decided to start a revolutionary organization called the Mukti Sangha in the premises of Kamrup Mahila Samity (Women Association) building. The girls took a pledge to fight for the liberation of the country from alien rule and signed it with their blood. Thereafter, Sukumari and Parul Moitra, daughter of Suren Moitra the famous revolutionary from Rajshahi also joined the Mukti Sangha. In 1929, the historic Lahore Congress was held under the presidency of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The resolution for independence was adopted in that session. There it was decided to celebrate the 26th January 1930 as the first Independence Day of India throughout the country. Accordingly the women of Kaliabor decided to join the celebration in the district head quarter town, Nowgong. More than 400 women proceeded towards Nowgong under the leadership of Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain and Kiranbala Bora. Women of the way-side villages also joined the procession. On 26th January, when the national flag was about to be hoisted in the presence of a huge crowd, the police started attacking the people. The people were beaten up and the national flag was taken away from them. In Sivasagar, a lady named Kamalabala Kakati was arrested; Women of Assam joined the movement in large numbers. Many Satyagrah 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. They therefore resorted to a series of meaningless 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, which had chosen this revolutionary way, had to face untold miseries. Often they walked for days together without a wink of nap or a piece of food, revealing their lives to a huge danger.

The women of Assam acknowledged Gandhiji’s concept of ‘Do or Die’ in their own way and joined in all kinds of actions during the Quit India movement. The Darrang District Congress Committee of Assam strong-willed to raise the national flag on the police stations and the court buildings, which were the symbols of British authority. Consequently, the plan was drawn under the leadership of Pushpalata Das to hoist the national flag on 20th September in Gohpur, Dhekijauli, Bihali and Sootea. It was determined to come out in processions consisting of men and women from close by villages and to advance for flag hoisting. The police opened fire on the peaceful processionists at Gohpur and Dhekijauli. Kanaklata Barua, Kahului Devi and Kamuli Devi died of bullet injuries on the spot and many others were badly injured. Being aware of women's participation in the nation's freedom struggle, Kanaklata enrolled herself in the suicide squad. The day for peaceful and non-violent action was decided as September 20. In the midst of such fighting caused by the police, Tileswari Mahanta, a dar-

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2 Sharma, D., (1) Assamese women in the freedom struggle, Calcutta, 1993, pp 34−36.
ing women volunteer fruitfully hoisted the national flag at Bihali police station. Besides Darrang district, in a number of other places like North Lakhimpur, Jorhat etc. endeavors were made to raise the national flag on government buildings.

On 15th October 1942, eighty women from the villages near Teok made an unsuccessful try to attack the police station devoid of any leader of importance. The women of Borpeta district attacked the Patacharkuchi police station and battered the police officer in retaliation to the police firing. The majority of the Assamese women generally participated in the movement on Gandhian non-violent line. But some of them being thwarted with the Gandhian methods became occupied in secretive and revolutionary activities. In the Sibsagar district, Aikan Bhuyan of Mudoijan near Teok took the escort in setting fire to the Amguri High School. She carried out numerous underground meetings where she allegedly initiated a number of congress youths to smash up government properties. Whereas the saboteurs were occupied in their destructing activities she often volunteered for guarding duty. The local congress handed over the job of carrying top secret messages from one place to another to Sudhalata Dutta and Roboti Laon, 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 Roboti Laon developed pneumonia and breathed her last while walking from Boloma to Ghiladhari.7 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 collaborated 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 safety of the secretive male workers. Brajnath Sarma’s wives, Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi helped their husband and his underground party workers to hold on their damaging 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 conveying secret circulars and bulletins. Another woman, Budheswari Hazarika took a lively part in reducing cargo boats carrying military supplies through the Brahmaputra river.8 During the year 1942 complete Police Raj was instituted in Assam and the people were subjected to incalculable unhappiness. The police were given unrestrained power of subjugation to control the movement. The distress of the women of Assam during this episode 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 atrocious police outrages, which included mass raping and molestation. 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 tormented both bodily and psychologically in different ways.

Findings

Starting with a limited participation in the 1921 phase, the involvement of women in the subsequent phases of the movement became huge in amount and similar in nature to that of the male participants. It was for this grounds that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were frightened of was not Gandhiji but the countless illiterate women of India who became the representative of the message of rebellion in every household. No military power could restrain such a beginning. In addition to the martyrdom of these womenfolk, a large number of female activists were seriously injured, while facing the police and military bullets. Around five hundred women freedom fighters had to tolerate the force of British atrocities in Assam in the movement for the country's liberation.9 The year 1920 had bystander the occurrence of the great nationalist movement in India under the leadership of Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi to make India free from the British subjugation. Along with the men, the women of Assam also counteract to each and every phases of the freedom movement initiated by Gandhiji, namely, the Non–Cooperation Movement Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. They contributed to the movement by arranging processions and picketing and undertaking tours to the remotest areas to spread the significance of the movement. In 1942, the Assamese women possibly outnumbered all other women of

9 Singh, Daya Nath. “Assamese women in India and freedom movement”.
the country in respect of bravery and sacrifice. The male counterparts were helped by the revolutionary group of women in cutting telephone and telegraph lines, burning government buildings and damaging bridges to paralyze the British administration. Thus the role played by Assamese women in different periods of freedom struggle had subsequently set an exemplary achievement in the era of history.

References


