
Contribution of Assamese Women to India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract:

The freedom struggle of India was not limited to men alone; women played an equally significant role in fighting against colonial rule. In Assam, women actively participated in various movements, protests and social reforms that contributed to India's independence. They took part in non-violent movements, civil disobedience, boycotts and revolutionary activities, often facing social barriers and personal risks. Prominent Assamese women like Kanaklata Barua, Ambika Gogoi and Indira Miri emerged as symbols of courage and determination, inspiring others to join the freedom movement. These women not only challenged colonial authority but also questioned traditional gender roles, asserting their place in public and political life. Their contributions were crucial in mobilizing communities, spreading nationalist awareness and strengthening the regional and national freedom struggle. Studying the role of Assamese women in India's independence highlights their courage, leadership and patriotism and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging women's participation in historical narratives. This research focuses on understanding their contributions, challenges faced and the lasting impact of their involvement in shaping Assam's socio-political landscape during the freedom struggle.

Keywords: Assamese Women, Freedom Struggle and Nationalism.

1. Introduction:

India's struggle for independence was not only a fight against British colonial rule but also a powerful social movement that brought about deep changes in Indian society. It united people from different regions, communities and social backgrounds under a common national goal. One of the most significant transformations of this period was the active participation of women, who had traditionally been restricted to domestic roles. During the freedom movement, women emerged as activists, organizers and revolutionaries, playing a crucial role in shaping nationalist consciousness. In Assam, women responded with great enthusiasm to the call for freedom, actively participating in movements led by Mahatma Gandhi as well as regional leaders.

The contribution of Assamese women holds special importance because their involvement challenged both foreign domination and long-standing patriarchal traditions. By stepping into public and political life, they questioned social norms that limited women's roles within the household. As historian Geraldine Forbes rightly observes, "*Women's participation in the nationalist movement redefined the boundaries of female agency in colonial India.*" Assamese women translated nationalist ideals into meaningful action by organizing protest meetings, picketing liquor shops, boycotting foreign goods, spinning khadi and spreading awareness in rural areas. Many of them also played a vital role in educating communities and motivating others to join the freedom struggle.

This study seeks to examine how Assamese women became active agents of social and political change during the freedom struggle. It also explores how their participation contributed to reshaping Assam's social structure, political awareness and collective identity during the period of India's national movement.

2. Historical Background of Assam in the Freedom Movement:

Assam came under British colonial rule following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which marked the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. British administration introduced new political and economic systems that significantly altered Assam's traditional way of life. Colonial policies disrupted the agrarian economy, imposed heavy land revenue systems and weakened indigenous institutions. The rapid expansion of tea plantations led to the exploitation of laborers and natural resources, resulting in widespread economic hardship and social discontent among the people of Assam.

By the early twentieth century, these conditions gave rise to strong anti-colonial sentiments and Assam gradually became an active participant in the Indian national movement. Organizations such as the Assam Association, established in 1903, played an important role in voicing regional concerns and promoting political awareness. Later, the formation of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee further strengthened Assam's connection with the national struggle. Major Gandhian movements, including the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) and the Quit India Movement (1942), received widespread support from the people of Assam.

Women's participation in these movements marked a significant turning point in the socio-political history of the region. Their involvement reflected a growing sense of political consciousness and national responsibility. By actively engaging in the freedom struggle, Assamese women not only contributed to the national cause but also began to assert their presence in public life, thereby bringing about lasting social and political change in Assam.

3. Importance of the Study:

The study of the contribution of Assamese women to India's freedom struggle is significant for several academic, social and historical reasons. First, it helps in presenting a more complete and inclusive understanding of India's nationalist movement by highlighting the role of women, which has often been overlooked in conventional historical narratives. By focusing on Assamese women, the study brings regional perspectives into the broader history of the freedom struggle and emphasizes that India's independence was the result of collective efforts from all parts of the country.

Secondly, this study is important for understanding how women in Assam challenged both colonial domination and traditional social restrictions. Their active participation in political movements marked a major shift in gender roles and contributed to the emergence of women in public and political life. This historical insight helps in tracing the roots of women's empowerment and leadership in post-independence Assam. Thirdly, the study contributes to the field of women's studies and social history by documenting the sacrifices, courage and leadership of Assamese women freedom fighters. It serves as a source of inspiration for present and future generations, particularly women, by showcasing how ordinary women played extraordinary roles during a critical phase of national history.

Finally, recognizing the contributions of Assamese women is essential for preserving historical memory and promoting gender equality in historical scholarship. The study encourages further research on regional women leaders and supports the inclusion of their contributions in educational curricula, thereby strengthening awareness of women's role in nation-building.

4. Review of Literature:

Several historians and scholars have examined women's participation in India's freedom struggle; however, the contributions of regional women, particularly Assamese women, have often received limited attention. Bipan Chandra (1989) highlights that the national movement created opportunities for women to enter public life, especially through Gandhian mass movements. Geraldine Forbes (1996) emphasizes that women's political participation during the freedom struggle challenged traditional gender roles and redefined women's social identity.

Studies on Assam's freedom movement by H.K. Barpujari and Amalendu Guha acknowledge the regional dimension of nationalism but provide relatively brief accounts of women's roles. Chandraprabha Saikiani's writings and biographies shed light on women's activism, education and social reform in Assam. Scholars such as S. Baruah have noted that women in Assam played a crucial role in mobilizing rural communities, particularly during the Quit India Movement.

Despite these contributions, there remains a research gap in systematically analyzing the collective role of Assamese women, their challenges and their long-term socio-political impact. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on Assamese women freedom fighters and their multifaceted contributions to India's independence.

5. Objectives of the Study:

The present study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical background of Assamese women's participation in India's freedom struggle.
2. To analyze the role played by Assamese women in major national movements such as the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements.
3. To highlight the contributions of prominent Assamese women freedom fighters.
4. To study the social, cultural and political challenges faced by women during the freedom struggle.
5. To assess the impact of women's participation on Assam's socio-political development.
6. To emphasize the importance of recognizing women's contributions in historical narratives.

6. Methodology:

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design and is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary sources such as books, journals, research articles, biographies, historical records, government publications and online academic resources related to India's freedom struggle and women's participation in Assam have been extensively consulted. The collected information has been critically analyzed using a qualitative approach to examine the nature, extent and significance of Assamese women's involvement in the freedom movement. A historical method has been applied to trace events chronologically and to interpret women's roles within the broader socio-political context of colonial Assam, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their contributions and experiences.

7. Emergence of Women's Participation in Assam:

Prior to the freedom struggle, Assamese women had very limited access to formal political spaces and decision-making processes. Social customs and patriarchal values largely confined them to household responsibilities. However, the rise of the nationalist movement created new opportunities for women to step into public life and contribute to the struggle for independence. The inclusive nature of the movement encouraged women to participate actively, particularly through peaceful and constructive activities.

The ideology of Mahatma Gandhi, which emphasized non-violence, moral strength and self-sacrifice, played a crucial role in encouraging women's participation. Gandhian principles provided women with a socially acceptable framework to engage in politics without directly confronting traditional norms. Women's organizations such as the Assam Mahila Samiti played an instrumental role in mobilizing women across both urban and rural areas. These organizations organized meetings, awareness programs and training sessions to involve women in nationalist activities.

Assamese women participated actively in spinning khadi, promoting swadeshi ideals and spreading awareness about the boycott of foreign goods. Many women transformed their homes into centers of nationalist activity, where discussions, planning and training took place. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, "*Women have an innate capacity for sacrifice, which makes them natural leaders in non-violent struggles.*" Inspired by this belief, Assamese women emerged as vocal supporters of independence and played a vital role in strengthening the freedom movement at the grassroots level.

8. Role of Assamese Women in the Non-Cooperation Movement:

The Non-Cooperation Movement marked the first large-scale and organized participation of Assamese women in the national freedom struggle. During this movement, women openly rejected British authority by boycotting foreign cloth, government institutions and liquor shops. They encouraged family members, neighbors and entire communities to follow the path of non-cooperation, thereby spreading nationalist ideals at the household level.

One of the most courageous forms of women's participation was the picketing of liquor shops. This activity exposed women to public criticism, social stigma and police brutality. Despite these risks, many Assamese women actively took part in such protests, displaying remarkable courage and determination. Several women were arrested, beaten or imprisoned for their involvement, yet they remained steadfast in their commitment to the cause of freedom.

Through their participation, women demonstrated moral resistance to colonial rule and inspired men to join the movement in larger numbers. The experience of organizing protests, addressing gatherings and facing repression helped women develop political awareness, leadership qualities and organizational skills. This phase proved to be a crucial foundation for their later involvement in more intense and revolutionary movements.

9. Participation in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements:

The Civil Disobedience Movement witnessed a significant increase in the participation of Assamese women. During this period, women actively violated colonial laws, particularly the salt laws, as an expression of defiance against British authority. They organized protest marches, supported underground activities and played a vital role in maintaining communication among nationalist leaders.

Women also contributed as fundraisers, messengers and protectors of revolutionary activists who were forced to operate secretly due to British repression. Their involvement ensured the continuity of the movement even during periods of intense crackdowns by colonial authorities. The dedication and bravery shown by women during this phase highlighted their growing political maturity and commitment.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 marked the peak of women's revolutionary participation in Assam. The martyrdom of Kanaklata Barua, a young freedom fighter from Gohpur, became a defining moment in Assam's freedom struggle. She was shot dead while attempting to hoist the national flag at a police station, symbolizing supreme sacrifice and fearless resistance. Her bravery inspired countless others to continue the struggle. As Jawaharlal Nehru rightly stated, "*The sacrifice of our women gave new strength to the freedom movement.*"

10. Prominent Assamese Women Freedom Fighters:

The freedom struggle in Assam witnessed the emergence of several courageous women leaders who played key roles in mobilizing the masses and strengthening nationalist movements. Among them, Kanaklata Barua stands out as a symbol of martyrdom and patriotism for her ultimate sacrifice during the Quit India Movement.

Ambika Gogoi was another prominent figure who actively participated in Gandhian movements and worked extensively to mobilize women across Assam. Her efforts helped increase women's political awareness and participation. Indira Miri contributed significantly by organizing women and promoting nationalist education, recognizing education as a vital tool for empowerment.

Chandraprabha Saikiani, a renowned social reformer and nationalist leader, worked tirelessly for women's rights while simultaneously participating in the freedom movement. These women challenged both colonial authority and patriarchal restrictions, proving that leadership, courage and patriotism are not determined by gender.

11. Social Reform and Nationalist Consciousness:

The role of Assamese women in the freedom struggle extended beyond political protests to include significant efforts in social reform. Women recognized that political freedom would remain incomplete without social transformation. As a result, they actively worked against social evils such as child marriage, illiteracy and various forms of discrimination.

Using nationalist platforms, women advocated for education of girls, economic self-reliance and social equality. They organized awareness campaigns and encouraged women to participate in community development activities. Their efforts helped strengthen social unity and broadened the scope of the freedom movement by linking nationalism with social reform.

As historian Bipan Chandra notes, "*The nationalist movement became a training ground for democratic and social values.*" Assamese women played a crucial role in promoting these values, thereby contributing to the moral and ideological strength of the nationalist struggle.

12. Challenges Faced by Assamese Women:

Despite their active involvement, Assamese women encountered numerous obstacles during the freedom struggle. Patriarchal social structures restricted their mobility and limited their participation in public activities. Many women faced opposition from family members and local communities who viewed political activism as inappropriate for women.

In addition to social barriers, women were subjected to harsh repression by British authorities. Arrests, lathi charges and imprisonment were common and women often endured physical and psychological suffering. Economic hardships, widespread illiteracy and lack of political training further constrained their participation.

Nevertheless, Assamese women continued to participate with remarkable resilience and determination. Their struggle was twofold against colonial oppression and against social constraints making their contributions particularly significant and commendable.

13. Impact on Assam's Socio-Political Landscape:

The participation of women in Assam's freedom struggle had a profound and lasting impact on the region's socio-political development. Women's active involvement expanded their roles in public life and laid a strong foundation for women's movements in the post-independence period. Many women went on to become leaders in education, politics and social service. The nationalist experience fostered self-confidence, political awareness and a strong sense of collective identity among women. It also contributed to the democratization of Assam's political culture by encouraging mass participation and inclusiveness across social groups.

As a result, women's involvement during the freedom struggle played a crucial role in reshaping Assam's socio-political framework, influencing the region's development long after independence.

14. Suggestions:

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. Greater emphasis should be given to the contributions of Assamese women in history textbooks and academic curricula at school and university levels.
2. Further research should be encouraged on regional women freedom fighters to ensure inclusive and balanced historical documentation.
3. Government and educational institutions should promote awareness programs, seminars and exhibitions highlighting women's role in the freedom struggle.
4. Preservation of historical records, letters and biographies of Assamese women freedom fighters should be prioritized.
5. Women's studies and history departments should integrate regional perspectives to enrich the understanding of India's nationalist movement.
6. The legacy of women freedom fighters should be used to inspire contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment.

15. Conclusion:

The contribution of Assamese women to India's freedom struggle represents a significant and inspiring chapter in the history of Indian nationalism. Through courage, sacrifice and dedicated leadership, these women challenged British colonial rule and transformed traditional social norms. Their participation strengthened mass movements, mobilized communities and reinforced the ethical and moral foundation of the freedom struggle.

Recognizing the role of Assamese women is essential for developing an inclusive and balanced understanding of history. As this study demonstrates, their contributions were not marginal but central to the success of the nationalist movement. Honoring their legacy not only pays tribute to their sacrifices but also inspires future generations to uphold the values of courage, equality, justice and patriotism.

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