

Voices of Valour: Assam's Women in India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract:

Women in Assam have historically been recognized for their courage, valor, and spirit of sacrifice. They have stood alongside men, whether in agriculture or on the battlefield, actively contributing to various spheres of life. Similar to their counterparts across India, Assamese women participated in the freedom movement with unwavering dedication and bravery, enduring significant hardships and torture in their pursuit of independence. Marching alongside men in the struggle, Assamese women established organizations to advance the objectives of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942) led by Mahatma Gandhi. They actively embraced Gandhi's call, engaging in constructive programs such as weaving, spinning, boycotting foreign goods, and campaigning against opium and liquor. During the freedom struggle, these women also contributed financial resources and acted as spies, courageously delivering secret letters and messages. Their involvement extended beyond traditional roles, as they actively participated in protests, rallies, and demonstrations against British rule. Many Assamese women faced imprisonment, torture, and even death for their unwavering commitment to the cause of independence. Their sacrifices and contributions played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of India's freedom struggle and inspiring future generations of women to actively engage in social and political movements.

This paper seeks to highlight the depth and significance of the contributions made by the women of Assam in India's fight for freedom.

Keywords:

Assamese, spinning, weaving, boycott and foreign.

1.0: Introduction

Assam lost its sovereignty following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. During the Anglo-Burmese War, the British assured the people of Assam that they had no intention of occupying the region. However, the abundant natural resources of Assam led the British to renege on their promise and covet the territory. Upon occupying Assam, the British commenced the oppression and exploitation of its people. They imposed new taxes, which severely burdened the common populace. While peasants were encumbered with these taxes, the royal families were stripped of their positions and reduced to the status of ordinary citizens. Under British rule, the handicraft industries also suffered significant decline. Although the primary objective of the British was to expel the Burmese from Assam, their underlying aim was to establish control over a land rich in natural resources. With this objective, they assumed administrative control of Assam. Consequently, discontent arose among the Assamese people, culminating in a violent struggle against British rule. During this struggle, the women of Assam, alongside their male counterparts, played a crucial role in resisting the foreign regime. Their active participation in the freedom struggle rendered them immortal in the annals of India's fight for independence. Even the Father of the Nation was impressed by the sacrifices made by the women of Assam. Their involvement in the three movements significantly contributed to India's attainment of freedom.

2.0: Objectives of the paper:

The primary objective of this paper is to examine and highlight the significant role played by the women of Assam in India's freedom struggle, particularly in the Non-Co-operation Movement (1920–1922), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942). It seeks to:

1. Document Women's Contribution: Provide a detailed account of the courageous participation of Assamese women in these three major movements, illustrating their sacrifices, leadership, and activism.
2. Analyze Challenges Faced: Shed light on the social, cultural, and political challenges they encountered, including arrests, torture, social ostracism, and even death, while fighting for India's independence.
3. Recognize Women Leaders: Highlight the contributions of key Assamese women leaders, such as Chandraprabha Saikiani, Kanaklata Baruah, Pushpalata Das,

Bhogeswari Phukanani, and many others, whose efforts inspired mass participation.

4. **Showcase Women's Multifaceted Roles:** Demonstrate how Assamese women acted not only as protesters but also as leaders, organizers, weavers, educators, spies, messengers, and supporters of revolutionary activities.
5. **Emphasize Regional Significance:** Reflect on how the women of Assam, like their counterparts across India, brought Gandhiji's message of non-violence and self-reliance into their communities, making the independence movement a mass struggle.
6. **Preserve Historical Legacy:** Contribute to the historical understanding of Assam's freedom fighters by acknowledging the bravery and sacrifices of women whose stories often remain underrepresented in mainstream narratives.

3.0: Research Methodology

This study is predominantly historical and qualitative in its approach. It employs a descriptive and analytical methodology to examine the involvement of Assamese women in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. The following methods were employed:

1. Historical Research Method:

The study follows a historical method to trace events, analyze facts, and interpret the contributions of women in Assam's freedom struggle. It organizes information chronologically to understand the evolution of women's involvement in these three major movements.

2. Qualitative Analysis:

Emphasis is placed on interpreting narratives, speeches, letters, and historical records to capture the depth of women's courage, leadership, and sacrifices rather than relying solely on numerical data.

3. Secondary Sources:

- Reference books, academic journals, and research papers on India's freedom movement and Assam's regional history.
- Historical articles published in journals such as Young India.
- Newspaper reports, magazines, and periodicals from the independence era.

4. Interdisciplinary Perspective:

The paper incorporates elements of history, gender studies, and sociology to highlight the intersection of social structures, colonial policies, and women's activism in Assam.

5. Comparative Regional Analysis:

The study briefly compares Assamese women's participation with the broader Indian context, emphasizing Assam's unique cultural and political contribution.

6. Data Interpretation and Documentation:

All findings are systematically categorized under each movement (1920–1922, 1930, and 1942) to maintain clarity. Descriptions of individual contributions are documented to ensure that lesser-known freedom fighters are given historical recognition.

4.0: Data Analysis

1. Participation of women of Assam in Non-Co-operation Movement (1920-22):-

The first political movement of India under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership was the Non-co-operation movement. He took the responsibility of movement and asked to follow the policy of non-violence¹. The programs of Non-co-operation movement were in two phrases constructive and destructive.

(i) Constructive programmes-

- a) Nationalization of education.
- b) Acceptance of swadeshi and its propagation.
- c) Application of the spinning wheel and the use of Khaddar.
- d) The enrolment of the Volunteer force.
- e) Collection of money for the Tilak Swaraj Fund.

(ii) Destructive programmes:-

- a) Boycott of the British law courts.
- b) Boycott of British educational institutions.
- c) Boycott of election to the legislative councils.
- d) Boycott of government programmes and festivals.
- e) Boycott of British goods².

The Non-Cooperation Movement was officially inaugurated on 1 August 1920, with Assam actively participating in this initiative. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the importance of

spinning, the use of khaddar, and the boycott of foreign textiles. In 1921, Gandhi visited Assam and addressed a large audience, which significantly contributed to the popularization of khadi and the charkha. Gandhi was so impressed by Assam's weaving industry that he authored an article in "Young India" under the title "Lovely Assam," where he remarked that "the women of Assam weave dreams of fairyland into the texture of their clothes." A notable aspect of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam was the active involvement of women. They played a crucial role in picketing shops that sold wine, bhang, opium, and foreign cloth, as well as organizing meetings and processions. In Assam, Krishnanath Sarma and Kanak Chandra Sarma were instrumental in promoting spinning and the use of khaddar. During this period, the saccha sevak visited various villages to teach weaving and spinning to women unfamiliar with these skills. At the Congress session in Gauhati in 1928, women from Nagaon, Morigaon, and the Barpajia area wove all the cloth used in the pandal. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, during his visit to Assam, was greatly impressed by the work of the women weavers in that region. However, disseminating the message of Non-Cooperation in villages was challenging, and many faced insults. In the villages of Dibrugarh, Hemanta Kumari Devi and other women volunteers were chased by villagers while spreading the movement's message. Shenyta Lata Devi, Girijha Devi, Rantashwar Devi, and Kaghendra Priya of Kamrup District played leading roles in propagating the movement's ideals.

Various organizations have been established to raise awareness among women regarding the detrimental effects of substances such as bhang and wine. Chandraprabha Saikiani resigned from her position as Headmistress at the school in Tezpur to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. Pramila Medak, a woman from the Mishing community in Golaghat, faced ostracism from her community for her participation in the movement. Dhariki Devi Baruah, another woman from Golaghat, was arrested for picketing in front of a wine and bhang shop. At the time of her arrest, she was pregnant and subsequently died due to inadequate medical treatment. The significant response to the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam can be attributed largely to the efforts of women leaders such as Hemanta Kumari Devi Bodoloi, poetess Nalinibala Devi, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Bijut Phookan, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Sarnalata Devi Baruah, Chandra Prabha Saikiani, and Shrijuta Rajabala Das, who served as the Secretary of the Dibrugarh Women's Congress Committee. However, when the movement reached its peak, Mahatma Gandhi suspended it in 1922 following the Chauri Chaura incident.

2. Partition of Women in Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam

In 1929, the Indian National Congress convened a session in Lahore, presided over by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. During this session, a resolution for complete independence was adopted. This pivotal event in Indian history is recognized as the Civil Disobedience Movement. It was officially initiated in March 1930 by M. K. Gandhi, who defied the salt law at Dandi. In Assam, supporters of the Dandi March organized a significant procession from Kaliabor to Nagaon, resulting in the arrest of numerous men and women. Among those arrested was a woman named Punyana Prabha Hazarika, who, along with her 18-month-old child, was detained for one day.

In this movement, women in Assam played a prominent role alongside their male counterparts. In Golaghat, a women's group was established under the leadership of Shrimati Swarnalata Barua, Raj Kumari Mohini Gohain, and Basanta Lata Hazarika⁹. They engaged in picketing in front of establishments dealing in wine, opium, and foreign textiles. In Kamrup, a group of women, under the auspices of the Kamrup Mahila Samitee, formed the 'Mukti Sangha,' a revolutionary organization aimed at overthrowing the foreign regime. The organizers of the Mukti Sangha included Pushpalata Das, Sarala Sakeraha, and Joshua Mazumder.

Women such as Basanta Lata Hazarika, Sashi Prabha Hazarika, and Mukta Prabha Hazarika participated in the picketing in front of Cotton College. During the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress, a resolution for complete independence was passed on January 26, 1930. On this day, complete independence was observed nationwide, including in Assam, where the Congress flag was unfurled at Jubilee Park in Gauhati by Tarun Ram Phukan⁸. Concurrently, women from Kaliabor decided to join the celebration at the district headquarters in Nagaon under the leadership of Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain, and Kirnabala Bora. Although the women from Kaliabor proceeded towards Nagaon, they were unable to hoist the flag due to police interference. Many women volunteers were subjected to physical assault and arrest during the movement. Women in Assam also contributed their ornaments and jewelry to support the movement, collecting funds to provide sustenance for Congress workers. Kironmoyee Agarwala supplied food and clothing to Congress volunteers who were imprisoned. Additionally, Kironmoyee Barkakati and Sarala Das maintained a Congress volunteer camp at their own expense.

During the non-co-operation movement Gandhiji again visited Assam for campaigning against untouchables. Though untouchables was not rigid in Assam like other parts of India, Harijans were not allowed to enter high caste Brahmin's house or in temple. Following the steps of Gandhiji a conservative Brahmin women named Grilibala Devi open their house temple for the Harijans. Sarnalata Baruah of Jorhat was known as Kasturba of Assam for her upliftment for the Harijans. Many Assamese women took a leading part in opening schools in the Harijan's areas⁵.

Under the influence of Gandhiji's policy of non-violence, women of Assam actively participated in all the programmes of Civil Disobedience movement and even Gandhiji had great faith in women for their activities.

3. Contribution of women of Assam in the Quit India Movement

The political situation of India changed greatly due to the Second World War. The failure of Cripps mission created political turmoil in India and the Indian National Congress resolved on 14th July 1942 to not co-operate with the government and asked the British Quit India. The resolution was adopted in the Bombay Congress on August 1942 as the Quit India Resolution. The Programmes of the Quit India Movement were

- Observance of Hartal in the certain day by fasting and prayers for the whole day. While observing hartal, force would not be applied.
- Preparing salt illegally.
- Non-payment of land tax.

4. The resolution of "Quit India Movement" demanded -

- The Freedom and independence of India along with the withdrawal of the British from India.
- It appealed to the India people to participate in a non-violent and peaceful struggle under the leadership of Gandhi.
- It appealed to each of the Indian People to participate in the struggle under his or her own leadership.

During the Quit India Movement, Gandhiji gave the Slogan "do or die". In this movement also wrome of Assam participated with great ethusium, courage and valour. Many sacrifice their lives in the movement. In fact, the Quit India Movement gave another opportunity to prove their ability in the movement.

In the district of Darrang, Puspallata Das took leading role in organizing the women folk. In Darrang two squads were organized -

1. Santi Bahini and
2. Mrittu Bahini

In Mrittu Bahini only those would be include whose age was between 18 to 50 year and who would face death smilingly. And in Santi Bahini any willing adult could joined. The members of Santi Bahini would work towards maintaining peace and order in villages.

In 20th September 1942, the members of Mrittu Bahini made a plan to hoist the National Flag at Police Stations of Gohpur. The participants were led by Golok Chandra Pujari and Jonaram Bhuyan. Kanaklata Baruah, a sixteen years old girl died of bullet injuries while proceeding towards the than building⁶.

At Dhekiajule, Kumali Nath Kakati, Tileswari Devi, Padumi Nath felt to police bullet while participating in flag hoisting programme Many women's were robbed by the police. A 12 years girl name Tilesawari also died from bullet injuries.

In September 16, 1942, at Barhampur in Nagoan district a festival was organized in the Congress office. Many people gathered in the Congress Office, seeing the gathered people police also arrived in the venue. A police tried to snatch the National flag from a girl name Ratnamala, but her grandmother Bhogeswari Phukanani resisted it by hitting the police with the pole of the flag⁷. At these the police shot Bhogeswari death.

In Behali, thana, the national flag was hoisted by Tileswari Mahanta. The women of Sootea organized under the leadership of Swarnaprovra Mahanta form Santi Bahini and Mrittu Bahini and acted as spies in transmitting secret bulletins and circulars of the congress among the masses. In Dibrugarh Mudhulata Dutta and Charboti Lahon acted as messengers in delivering secrets letters.

In some places women also supported the policy of violence and destruction. In Teok Inak Bhuyan took leading part in setting fire a school in Amguri. Joymoti Saikia of Nagaon helped the revolutionary in burning down the bridge of Bhebejia. Other women from Lakhimpur named Bhudheswari Hazarika helped in drowning a cargo boat, which was used for transporting British Goods. Thus during the freedom movement, women of Assam face various hardships. Many were arrested, tortured, molested and fell to police bullets. According the Report of Bordoloi Committee report of Atrocities, 1942, about 80 women of Barmhaputra valley were victims of police and brutalities.

5.0: Findings

The analysis of the three movements reveals that the contributions of women from Assam were indeed heroic. They sacrificed their lives and endured various hardships to ensure the success of these movements. Notably, in 1930, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald acknowledged that their concern was not with Gandhiji, but rather with the countless illiterate women of India who became the voice of revolt within every household. Such an awakening could not be suppressed by military force. The study indicates that women of Assam played a remarkably courageous and active role in India's struggle for independence, particularly during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942). Their involvement was not merely symbolic; it encompassed leadership, organization, and direct participation in revolutionary activities.

1. Unwavering Courage and Sacrifice:

Women from Assam demonstrated extraordinary bravery, often facing imprisonment, torture, social ostracism, and even death. Some, like Dhariki Devi Baruah and Kanaklata Baruah, sacrificed their lives, proving their commitment to the cause of freedom.

2. Breaking Social Barriers:

Many Assamese women stepped out of traditional domestic roles to lead protests, picket liquor and opium shops, organize meetings, and mobilize villages. Even conservative families supported women's involvement, indicating a shift in societal norms.

3. Leadership and Inspiration:

Leaders like Chandraprabha Saikiani, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Pushpalata Das, and Sarnalata Devi Baruah inspired widespread participation among women across communities, including marginalized groups such as the Mishing community.

4. Contribution Beyond Protest:

Women also contributed to the movement by weaving khadi, organizing volunteer camps, donating jewelry and wealth, and supporting jailed freedom fighters with food and resources. Their work in education and social reform further strengthened the freedom struggle.

5. Resistance to British Oppression:

Women faced brutal repression during all three movements, as documented in the Bordoloi Committee Report of Atrocities (1942) ¹⁰. Despite this, they remained resilient and continued their activism.

6. Regional Pride with National Impact:

The involvement of Assamese women symbolized the unity of India's freedom struggle, showing that the spirit of independence transcended regional boundaries. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Rajendra Prasad recognized and praised Assamese women's weaving skills, courage, and dedication.

Thus, braving untold of miseries, tortures and hardships innumerable women of Assam participated in the three movements to root out British imperialism from the country.

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