



Women in the freedom struggle movement of Assam: A historical study

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Abstract

India's struggle for Independence from the British was one of the greatest mass movements in the history of the world. It was a long drawn struggle of the Indian people from different corners of India irrespective of any caste or creed. Assam, which is located in the south of the Eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak valley, was also a part of the Indian National Movement. The important feature of the Assam's national movement was the active participation of the women. They were truly involved in the protest against the colonial power and established many political agency. The main purpose of this paper is to bring the historical importance of the Assamese freedom fighters specially women into the main stream history.

Keywords: Assam, resistance movement, struggle, women

Introduction

Indian's struggle for freedom was one of the greatest mass movements in the history of the world. People from different parts of the country showed a stiff resistance against the British and participated in the Indian national movement. In this context, Assam, which is located in the north eastern part of India also took an active participation with the counter parts of India and contributed to the history of the India's Freedom Struggle. Assamese leaders along with the masses dedicated their life for India's Independence. The war of independence from the British Regime in Assam actually started from the year 1826 under the leadership of Dhanjoy Borgohain and it continued till 1947 under the leadership of many important leaders. The most important feature of the Assam's freedom movement was the participation of the Assamese women and their contribution towards the Nation. Along with their active participation, they also established many political organisations and planned many conspiracies against the Britishers. This paper is an attempt to bring out the history of the Assamese leaders specially women and also men, who fought together for the cause of India's Independence.

Brief outline of the History of Assam

Prior to the advent of the British East India Company, the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by the Ahoms, an offshoot of the Tai or the great Shan tribe of south East Asia. The advents of Ahoms in the early decades of the thirteenth marked the beginning of the Medieval Period of Assam^[1]. However, in general, the history of Assam has passed several stages of development to reach its present stage. The proto-historic Assam is reconstructed from epics and literature such as *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*. The historical account of Assam began with the establishment of PushyaVarman's dynasty in the fourth century in the Kamarupa Kingdom (ancient name of Assam), which marked the beginning of the Ancient history of Assam. However, the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa disintegrated after the fall of the Palas in the twelfth century and there had been emergence of number of independent or semi-independent Kingdoms^[2]. Ahoms subjugated all the independent rulers and established their Kingdom for a period of six hundred years.

Assam came under the control of East India Company with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in the month of February 24, 1826. During this time Assam was under a political turmoil because of the Moamariyas rebellion. Though, British initially appeared as the saviour of the Assamese people but their imperialistic intentions soon became apparent and the discontentment against the British rule began to rear its head^[3].

Role of Assamese Women and their Political Organisations

India has produced great women throughout her long political, social and cultural existence^[4]. Indian women have earned the recognition by their earnest and active participation in the Indian national movement as they played an important role to make her nation free from the clutches of British. History has witnessed that in the year 1857, there has been significant number of armed revolt against the British rule. This was the preliminary phase of India's struggle against the British rule in which many women from the Indian Royal families played an important role^[5]. The historic role of Rani Laskmi bai of Jahnsi, Rani of Ramgarh, Rani of Jyepore, youngest wife of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab, Rani Tace Bai of Central India and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Oudh^[6] was noteworthy. In the same way, Assamese women were also never left behind. They had an active participation against the British rule.

In the year 1828, there was the first attempt of revolt against the British to install Gomdhar Konwar at the Ahom throne^[7]. This failed attempt not only resulted in the arrest of Assamese nobles but the mother of Gomdhar Konwar and his sister was also arrested for their involvement. In another attempt that was happened in the year 1830, under the leadership of Dhananjay Borgohain, Jewram Dulia Baruah, Peuli Borphukan was also failed. This failed attempt cost the arrest of the many leaders along with their wives^[8]. This incidents shows the bravery and the involvement of the Assamese women to throw out the British rule from the land of Assam in spite of being suppressed or getting arrested.

The active participation of the Assamese women is also observed in the Indian National movement of the 20th century. During the Non-Co-operation movement, Assamese women came out from their domestic boundaries and actively participated. They participated in the Non-co-operation movement through the programmes of spinning, weaving, boycotting of imported foreign goods^[9]. This is the period when women joined many political organisations like *Assam Chatra Sammilan* (Assam Student Association) and *Assam Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Society) till the formation of the *Assam Mahila Samiti* (Assamese Women Association) in 1926 which was a provincial women association^[10]. Their organisation as well as the publicity works served as a source of inspiration to the other urban and rural women of Assam and educate them to get freedom from the clutches of British rule.

Further, another one of the most constructive role of Assamese women was their contribution to the *Tilak Swaraj fund*. They contributed both in cash and kind. It is worth to mention that twelve ladies from the district of Sibsagar town donated all their valuables ornaments to the fund^[11]. There has been also report of instances of parting with diamond rings and donating it for the cause of Independence.

In year 1930, Pusalata Das, a young Satyagrahi who joined the *Banar Sena* to propagate *khadi* at the age of six, along with Sarla Saxena. Punya prava and Jyotsa Majumdar, organised the Mukri Sangha to mobilise girls in the National Movement. Their fiery speeches electrified young minds who pledged to fight for Poorna Swaraj. The rapidly increasing membership and the activities of the Sangha, caused grave concern to the British govt. and the Pusalata, who was then the Union Secretary, Panbazar Girl's High School, was expelled from the institution. The government agreed to re-instate her on condition that her mother signed a bond guaranteeing her 'good behaviour'. However, her mother Swarnalati, refused to give this undertaking. The support of her family emboldened her further and rather than defusing her spirit, the incident ignited the spark in Pusalati's into the flame^[12]. Inspired by her courage and commitment to the cause, several students committees started imparting training in martial arts for girls in order to meet exigencies in the ensuing civil dis-obedience movement^[13].

There are many other Assamese women like Bidyut Prova Devi, Nalini Bala Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharya, Chandraprobha Saikiani, Kiran Bala Barkakti, Kiranmayi Agarwalla Lilabati Kakati, Shahsiproa Chaliha, Hemoprova Das, Sashprova Das, Ratna Bezbarua, Guneswari Devi, Guneswari Majumdar, Khagendrapriya Barua, Banumati Talukdar, Hemanta Kumari Devi and Debeswari Hazarika, who dedicated their whole life for the cause of Indian's independence.

The most courageous woman, Mungri alias Malatimen, who belongs to the Tea Garden labour community of Lalmati Darrang District, was the first Assamese women Martyr who ended her life for the cause of Indian Independence during the Non-co-operative movement of 1921^[14]. During the year 1930s, the women of Assam were also very active and participated in the National Movement. In different corners of Assam, *Nari- Bahinis* or Women Squads were formed for carrying out the programmes of picketing. They were also involved in the activity of anti-opium campaigning^[15]. Along with this, a group of girl student of Assam decided to start a revolutionary organisation called Mukti Sangha in the premise of Kamrup Mahila Samiti building^[16].

The Satyagraha phase of 1940s of the Indian National Movement also saw an active participation of the Assamese women. They doesn't limit themselves with individual Satyagraha but also took part in the collective Satyagraha. In this connection, Swarnalata Baruah and Haripriya Dutta of Golaghat were the first women of the Brahmaputra valley to undergo rigorous imprisonment because of their participation in the individual Satyagraha. It is learnt from many sources that many women from different corners of Assam took the path of Swarnalata Baruah and Haripriya. There has been also establishment of many training centres for women to make the movement successful^[17].

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was also another important National movement to throw out the British from the Indian soil. In the words of Subhash Chandra Bose; a new chapter in the Indian Freedom Struggle began with the quit India Movement. A large number of people from different parts of the country participated in the movement. The Assamese women along with the male folk were never left behind. Kanaklata Baruah of Assam was the most famous martyr of this movement. Women like Amalprova Das, Chandraprava Saikiani, Pusalata Das and many others dedicated their life for the movement. Many of them also became the member of *Mritya Bahini* or Death squad from different corners of Assam. They suffered various injuries and even death but they proved themselves to be the best inspiration to fight for the cause of India's Independence^[18].

Assamese leaders and their resistance against British rule

In general, Assamese people made several attempts to overthrow British rule from the Indian soil. However, the first such attempt was made in 1826 by a group of disgruntled nobles headed by Dhanjoy Borgohain, a former officer of rank, who took up the cause of Gomdhar Konwar, son of Phena Konwar, a scion of the Royal family^[19]. At Baasa, in the south-east corner of Jorhat, Gomdhar was formally enthroned and was vested with white shoes and the umbrella, the insignia of Royalty. The *Bailungs* or the priests performed the rituals. Brisk

preparation was made to march against the English by recruiting men, collecting arms and levying contributions. In the last week of November 1828, in order to concert measures with their collaborators at the headquarters, the rebels advanced towards Mariani, 12 miles from Jorhat, where they were intercepted by a detachment under Lieutenant Rutherford. After a feeble resistance Gomdhar fled into the Naga Hills and most of his followers fell into the hands of the detachment ^[20]. This first attempt of revolt against the British regime was, thus, resulted in a failure due to its poor organisation and was suppressed by the British.

However, almost simultaneously, the Khasis under the leadership of U. Teerat Singh, the chief of Nungkhlaio were also maturing plans on a grand scale to expel the British from their hills, while at the same time in the Eastern frontier, another attempt to overthrow the British rule was made by Eyang Goomendao alias Gadadhar Singha, a kinsman of ex raja Jogeswar Singh and a supposed protégé of the Burmese Monarch ^[21]. Unfortunately, both this attempt to root out British from Indian soil failed. Nevertheless, the events left a terrible imprint in the minds of the British officers and continued to haunt them for a considerable period of time.

In the meantime, when British were busy in combating the rebels led by valiant Khasi chiefs, there was an ongoing preparation of a well-planned insurrection in upper Assam by a section of the Nobility under the influence of Dhanjoy Borgohain. He was the conspirator of the rebellion of 1828 and was captured by British for abetting and aiding the rebellion. Dhanjoy Borgohain had already been sentenced to death but he somehow, managed to escape to Naga Hills. In the later years of 1829, he appeared again in upper Assam and eluding vigilance of the police began to move from one place to another trying to enlist the support of all those who wanted elimination of the British rule.

Dhanjoy sent his representatives to different parts of Assam including Morans, Khamtis, the Sinphoes, the Nagas and even to the distant Khasis and Garos seeking their help to remove the British power. He received welcomed support from many neighbouring areas and gradually there was an increase in the number of his supporters. Many of the influential people including his sons Harakanta and Haranath, son-in-law Jeuram Dulia Barua, Piyoli Baarphokan, son of Badaan Baarphokan, ex-viceroy of lower Assam, Boom Singhphooee, Rupchand Konwar joined him.

Meanwhile, the rebels developed an effective network of spies and succeeded in obtaining valuable information regarding the strength of the British troops. There was also a possibility of a secret understanding to be arrived with the Khasis, who were then fighting a fierce battle for liberation. The concern of the British military officer can be gauged from a letter written by Neuville to Colonel C Fagon, Adjutant General of the Army. The letter spoke about the powerful network of the rebellion and remarks that letters from the rebel Bargohain to the Eastern chiefs contains the most accurate information of the British troop's strength and Military resources, the amount of posts and detachments and of the inefficient men both in Assam and Jumalpor ^[22].

The rebels, at first, performed a sacrificial ritual and advanced towards Rangpur, a former capital of the province. Their plan was to set fire to the Magazine near the sepoy lines and then to fall upon the enemy ^[23]. The arrival of the detachment of Assam Light Infantry from Jorhat, however, forced the rebels to retreat to Geleki where most of them with the exception of Dhanjoy and his eldest son, who once again succeeded to slip into the thick jungles, were apprehended ^[24]. The reason for failure of this attempt is proved to be the treachery of the Khamti Chief, the Sadiya Khuwa Gohain, who, instead of supporting the cause of the insurgents, handed over the Dhanjoy's son Haranath to the English while he was trying to enlist the support of the former by carrying an important letter from his father.

This attempt resulted to the arrest of several important leaders from different corners of Assam. The arrested leaders were brought to trial at Sibsagar and six of the important leaders including Piyoli Borphukan, Jeuram Dulia Barua, Rupchand Konwar, Xeoram Dihingia Barua, Boom Singhpoo and Haranath were found guilty of sedition and sentenced to death. David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General, to whom the proceedings of the Panchayat were forwarded for approval, believed that a deterrent punishment was absolutely necessary to prevent recurrence of similar opposition in future. He also mentioned that the laxity shown in the earlier cases proved to be disastrous as it led to another rebellion among the people of the upper Assam.

Moreover, the death of Captain Neuville, who had been successfully conducting operations against the rebels for the last few years, convinced Scott of the expediency of making a public example for raising voices against the colonial power. He, therefore, confirmed death sentence on Peuli and Jeuram, and commuted the punishment on the remaining four to banishment for fourteenth years with confiscation of property ^[25]. Accordingly, Piyoli and Jeuram were hanged at Sibsagar in Aug 1830 and the other accused were sent to Dacca for safe confinement ^[26].

Conclusion

The role of Assamese people in the freedom struggle against the British has occupied a significant place in the history of India. From time to time, numbers of attempt has been made to overthrow the British regime from the Indian soil. The resistance movement of 1830, although failed, to achieve its actual purpose, was a well organised rebel movement which inspired the people in the coming generations to participate largely for the cause of India's Independence. It is considered as the first organised uprising among the masses of Assam to remove the colonial power. In fact, the background of the 1857 struggle in Assam was prepared long before the Revolt actually broke out. The role and participation of the Assamese people specially the women folk in the Indian National movement was noteworthy. Women, altogether from different corners of Assam fought bravely and dedicated their entire life for Indians Independence. The resistance movement from 1820's onwards, continued throughout different parts of Assam till Indian finally attains its Independence in 1947.

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