

Women of Assam in the National Movement (1905-1922)

Dr. Memchaton Singha

Assistant Professor, History, Rabindrasadan Girls' College, Sribhumi

Abstract

Assam is one of the important states of North East India with its glorious history. The people of Assam fought hand in hand with other part of Bharat in the national movement against the British colonial power to obtain freedom. The history of freedom movement in Assam remains incomplete until we incorporate the huge role and sacrifices made by the women of the state to attain Swaraj from the Britishers. Therefore, the main objective of this research paper is to give comprehensive history about the role played by the women of Assam specially during the Swadeshi Movement and Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam.

INTRODUCTION

Assam is one of the important seven (7) states of North East India. The state is geographically divided into two fertile valleys i.e. Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Assam like other parts of India have gone through numerous atrocities done on its people during British rule in India. British annexation of Assam began after the First Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826 which ended with the signing of Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The long 600 years of Ahom rule in Assam was slowly put to an end by the British colonizers. The new foreign administrative changes were not accepted by majority of the people. People of the land were tortured, humiliated and treacherously killed in many occasions. Thus, the people of Assam irrespective of caste, creed and sex fought to attain freedom from the British yoke.

The history of freedom movement in Assam remains incomplete until we incorporate the huge role and sacrifices made by the women of the state to attain Swaraj. Women of both the Valleys of Assam irrespective of their social classes have participated in the fight against the British colonialism. In several occasions many of them have laid their life for the cause of motherland. The women of Assam played vital and active role especially during the national movement of 20th century such as the Swadeshi movement, Non-Cooperation movement (1920-1922), Civil-Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and the Quit India Movement (1942). The Non-Violent principle of Gandhiji attracted the women of Assam to show their patriotic valour and activities. The national movement of 20th century brought about great reforms and changes in the socio-political conditions of the women of the state. Women in large scale came outdoors living behind their age-old social binding and participated whole heartedly in many movements until India achieved its freedom from the Britishers. However, this paper attempts to emphasize specially on the role Assamese women played during the Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation movement.

ASSAMESE WOMEN IN SWADESHI MOVEMENT

Like other parts of India, the wrath of British colonial administration was faced by every section of the society in Assam. The atrocities and exploitation of people in all aspect of life through out many years led the people of Assam irrespective of caste, class, creed and sex to show their anger and resistance against

the foreign power. The women of Assam like other parts of Bharat-Varsha took active part in many of the anti-British movement for attaining *Swaraj*.

The spark of patriotism and nationalism began to engrain deeply among the women of the Assam with the beginning of 20th century. **Majumdar, R.C., A (1963)** In the first decade of the century the British authorities planned to divide the province of Bengal which included Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1903, Lord Curzon Government proposed to separate the whole of Chittagong Division and the Districts of Decca and Mymensingh from Bengal, and to incorporate them with Assam. **Chakraborty, Ranjan., (2008)** The partition was planned in such a way that the Hindus of the united Bengal would be politically separated from each other which also proved as an assault to the Bengali national sentiment. Since 1903 people of all classes of Bengal protested against the partition plan. The final partition took place on 16th October 1905. However, once the partition was declared the protest became more wider and greater. The result of the British partition plan was the Swadeshi and Boycott movement. The day of partition was declared to be a day of mourning. As a symbol of brotherhood and unity people tied *rakhi* on each other. **Majumdar, R.C., B (1963)** Before the partition came into effect, on 7th August 1905 an anti-partition meeting was organized in the Town Hall of Calcutta and the boycott of British goods, and this was adopted as the national policy. Leaders like Surendranath Banerjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Anandamohan Bose etc. appealed to boycott the foreign goods and buy Swadeshi items. The call of the Swadeshi and Boycott movement spread all over India.

In the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the movement were confined to urban and semi-urban areas. The town people started using *Khaar* instead of foreign salt, sugar from Banaras and indigenously woven cloths. **Goswami, Priyam, A (2012)** The head priest of the Kamakhya temple appealed to the *Pandas* and grocers not to purchase or sell foreign items. Youths like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Bisnuram Medhi, Triguna Barua, Raktim Bora etc. were influenced by the revolutionary ideas of the time. **Suman Pandey & Gautam Choubey, A (2015)** In their paper mentioned that anti – Partition meetings were held at Tezpur, Barpeta, Gauhati, Silchar, Karimganj and Habiganj. In many places people organized rally and sang patriotic songs. *Bande Mataram* was the tune of the time. **Majumdar, R.C., C (1963)** cited that Surendranath Banerjee has opined that “It was a strange upheaval of public feeling. The *Swadeshi* movement invaded our homes and captured the hearts of our women folk who were even more enthusiastic than the men”.

In regard to people of Barak valley the impact of partition was deeply felt as they will be separated from their sister land. **Barpujari, H.K, Barpujari, S.K & A.C. Bhuyan, (1977)** The partition was strongly opposed by the people of the Valley through the ‘Surma Valley Political Conference’. It has its first session of Conference in Sylhet in 1906 under the Presidentship of Kamini Kumar Chanda and was addressed by the nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal. **Datta, Devasree, A (2005)** The second session of the Surma Valley Political Conference was held at Karimganj on 18 April to 20 April 1907. The women of Karimganj did not participate directly but they had their indirect participation. They showed their patriotism and support to the movement by boycotting foreign goods. A bonfire of foreign clothes was organized by women of the session. The inspector of Karimganj reports that during the Puja holidays most of the people of that subdivision bought Swadeshi cloths and no offering of ‘Belati’ (foreign) articles were made to the Goddess Durga. It goes without saying that marketing during Durga Puja has always been centred around women.

Datta, Devasree, B (2005) A new political organization “Cachar Swadeshi Sabha” was formed with Kamini Kumar Chanda and Abanti Nath Dutta as President and Secretary respectively. When Bipin

Chandra Pal visited Silchar with the objective to popularize Swadeshi the womenfolk expressed their wish to listen to Bipin Chandra Pal as they could not attend the organized public meetings due to social restriction. Therefore, a separate meeting exclusively for women was organized in the house of Mahesh Chandra Datta. About 40 ladies attended the meeting and listened to Bipin Chandra Pal. He encouraged the women to join the Swadeshi movement and boycott the foreign goods. He also requested the women to learn weaving and spinning and also to teach the young girls. **Suman Pandey & Gautam Choubey, B (2015)** In course of movement, women of Barak Valley like Hironikumari Dutta, Soudamini Deb took the lead and even visited nearby areas to encourage the women to join the swadeshi movement. Bipin Chandra Pal addressed another large gathering at Badarpur who assembled for Baruni Snan and Siddheswar Mela. During this gathering he was not only able to influence the male folk but also the women too. The visit of Bipin Chandra Pal in Surma Barak Valley had great impact on the women of the Valley. His deliberate speeches helped encourage and ignite the spirit of patriotism in them. The message of Swadeshi reached not only the elite women but also of the remote areas slowly.

ASSAMESE WOMEN IN NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT

Mahatma Gandhi arrived in India on January 9, 1915. By 1920 he emerged as the acknowledged leader of Indian National Congress. Just after the end of First world war, the reforms and activities of British power in India brought about great changes in the ongoing national movement in India. The Rowlatt Act passed by the British Government asserting authority to imprison any one on suspect of conducting revolutionary activities led to critical protest. Meanwhile, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar created the situation more severe. The killing of innocent people by the British forces made the nationalist Indians furious. On the other hand, the Khilafat movement was launched under the leadership of Gandhiji. **Majumdar, R.C., D (1963)** The Congress session held at Nagpur in December 1920 formally announced for the launched of Non-Cooperation movement. The decision of non-Cooperation was the direct outcome of the Khilafat movement. **Sharma, Dipti., A (1993)** The programmes of the of movement included promotion of Swadeshi goods, revival of hand spinning and domestic weaving, removal of untouchability from the Hindu society, promotion of unity among Hindu and Muslim, prohibition of the use of intoxicants and alcoholic drinks and raising of one crore of rupees to constitute the Tilak Memorial Swarajya Fund. Boycott of legislatures, courts, government aided educational institutions, surrender of titles and honours awarded by the government and boycott of foreign goods formed the negative aspects of the movement. The call for Non-violent Non-Cooperation reached every nook and corner of the country. People of all classes in every region participated in the movement in their own way showing their resentment against the British Raj.

Sharma, Dipti., B (1993) The people of Assam immediately responded to the call of the movement. In Brahmaputra Valley, the Assam Association organized meetings at various places like Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Nowgong to campaign for non-cooperation movement. Leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan, Chandranath Sarma, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and many others propagated to support the non-cooperation programme. In the meantime, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was formed on 1921 replacing the Assam Association. Processions were organized, students boycotted their institutions, foreign cloths were burnt down and boycotted. Many lawyers and clerks joined the movement and left their offices and courts. The women of Assam did not remain silent during such huge movement which was called by Gandhiji and the Indian National Congress. The belief and confidence showed by Gandhiji on women of Assam boosted up the mindset of the Assamese women. **Goswami, Priyam. B (2012)** Despite certain social

restrictions women like Bidyutprova Devi, Girija Devi (sister of Tarun Ram Phukan), Hemanta Kumari Devi, Dharmada Devi, Nalinibala Devi (wife, sister and daughter respectively of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi), Pushpalata Das, Guneswari Nath and Chandraprova Saikiani took the lead and actively participated in the movement. **Sharma, Dipti., C (1993)** In January 1921, a group of women of Gauhati proposed to take out processions to violate Sec. 144 and court arrest as part of the movement's programme. The initiative was taken by Bidyutprova Devi, wife of Tarun Ram Phukan. However, on the advice of Gandhiji the plan was dropped. These women leaders carried on their work in both urban and village areas to propagate the message of Non-Cooperation, boycotting of foreign goods, to learn spinning and weaving, to abstain from consumption of toxic elements etc. It is to be mentioned that people in some of the villages reacted violently when the Congress workers entered. **Sharma, Dipti., D (1993)** In one of the villages in the Dibrugarh district, the villagers with stuff in their hands chased the women workers out of the villages. Similar situation was faced by many other women too.

However, the visit of Mahatma Gandhi in Assam brought about great changes among the women of Assam. The participation of women in the Non-Cooperation programme increased in large numbers. Even the women in the rural areas were moved by Gandhiji's call to join the movement. On 18th August 1921 Gandhi arrived at Gauhati and he addressed a big meeting. At the end of the meeting a bonfire of foreign cloths was organized where many women burnt their foreign cloths. **Sharma, Dipti., E (1993)** On the next day he attended a number of meetings organised by Assamese, Marwari and Bengali women. Gandhi was presented with a Khaddar 'Chadar' woven with their own hand spun yarn. He was so impressed and expressed the hope that Assamese women alone could supply a considerable portion of khadi cloth needed by the whole of India. **Abhinab Nath, Babita Deka, Khogen Gogoi, Mainee Saikia & Himangshu Shekhar Bora., (2021)** In another occasion Gandhiji complemented that 'Assam will rise to its full height in the matter of Swadeshi (National). Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves'.

The visit of Gandhiji and his speeches had great impact on the women of rural areas too. Many active women workers sprang up from many corners of Brahmaputra Valley. Mention may be made of women like Guneswari Mazumdar from Barnagar, Bhanumati Talukdar of Godebori (called as Vonteerani Bai by the locals and as 'Sarojini of Assam' by Mahatma Gandhi) and many more. **Sharma, Dipti., F (1993)** In the district of Darrang, Mongri alias Malati Maam who was a tea garden labour girl helped Congressmen volunteers in propagating the programmes of Non-Cooperation movement that included propaganda against alcohol consumption. But she was killed for helping the Congress volunteers. Mongri was the first women martyr of Non-Cooperation movement in Assam. Unlike that of Swadeshi movement, the participation of women in Non-Cooperation movement was remarkable in Brahmaputra Valley. Remarkable devotion and patriotism were shown by women of every community. **Goswami, Priyam., C, (2012)** It is worth mentioning that, Pramila Medak a Missing women of Golaghat despite being excommunicated from the community for participating in movement still continued to remain as an active worker. These are some of the women mentioned but there were many such women throughout the state who actively participated in the movement.

Bhattacharjee, J.B., A (1971) In Barak Valley, the Surma Valley Political Conference in its session held at Karimganj in July 1920, under the Presidentship of Bipin Chandra Pal insighted for a stronger movement and the leading role was for the movement was taken by Shrish Chandra Datta, the Principal organizer of the Conference. **Datta, Devasree, C (2005)** In the same year the Cachar District Congress Committee was formed with Kamini Kumar Chanda as the President. Lawyers gave up legal practice, Govt. titles were refused and many students boycotted the Govt. Schools as a part of Non-Cooperation

movement. The leaders of the movement in Cachar were Kamini Kumar Chanda, Shyama Charan Deb, Sanat Kumar Das, Sibendra Kumar Biswas, Prakash Chandra Bhattacharjee, Ganga Dayal Dixit and others. Whereas in Karimganj, Satish Chandra Deb, Shrish Chandra Datta, Radha Benode Das, Khirode Chandra Deb etc.

The role of women of Barak Valley during Non-Cooperation movement requires special mention. It was the women from urban area who came out in the forefront to take active role. **Bhattacharjee, J.B., B (1971)** The women torch bearers of the movement were Sibsundari Devi, wife of Kamini Kumar Chanda and Saudamini Devi, wife of Shyam Charan Deb. The women workers formed the 'Silchar Mahila Samiti' and published their organ 'Vijoyini'. The features of non-violent suited the women for their equal participation. The programme of Non-Cooperation with the British authorities, boycott of foreign goods, institution, adoption of Swadeshi goods was actively conducted in Barak Valley too. Many students have boycotted their educational institutions. **Datta, Devasree, D (2005)** In Silchar, Amita Chanda, daughter of Kamini Kumar Chanda left her school when the Head Mistress Miss Evans of the School made degrading remarks about the Indians. The courage of Amita became widespread in Barak Valley. The result of her action was the establishment of first school for girls at Silchar. The school started on 1 August 1921 and it was named as Dinanath Nabakishore Valika Vidyalay (DNNK Girl's School). It was however popularly known as 'Swadeshi School'. The school became centre for all the nationalist activities and students of the school regularly participated in the programmes of the movement.

Mahatma Gandhi's call for Non-Cooperation had great impact among the tea garden labourers of the Surma Barak Valley. They were victim of inhuman atrocities done by the European tea planters. Their life was in measurable condition not only due to rise of prices in the commodities but also as they were being forced to work in low wages. Meanwhile, when the call for boycott of foreign goods was launched as a part of Non-Cooperation movement they responded quickly. Since then, **Kumar, P., A (2006)** the labour movement which was so long having an anti-imperialist character became part of the national movement as well. **S.N., Singh, Amarendra Narain & Purnendu Kumar., (1984)** The European tea planters always intended to employ women as they were sincere in their work. However, their intention included fulfilment of their individual desire. Many women committed suicide as they could not conceal their physical assault. The resentment of the tea labourers against the Britishers were increasing day by day due to inhuman atrocities done on them. Whereas atrocities and tortures done on women were numerous and beyond imagination. **Datta, Devasree, E (2005)** In one of the incidents at Khoreal tea garden the Assistant Manager of the garden tried to exploit the chastity of a girl named Hira. On her refusal he shot down her father and son. In another instance, a coolie woman was made to seat on a tank full of leeches as punishment. Meanwhile the nationalist workers like Gangadayaal Dixit, Deosharan Tripathy and Ramprasad Choubey convinced the labourers and encouraged them to stop working in those gardens. They with many other workers visited the market places of those labourers to spread the programme of Non-Cooperation. **Datta, Devasree, F (2005)** In a meeting organized at Ratabari (Chargola Valley) on May 1921, the activists gave inspiring speeches with nationalist tone and they even encouraged them to leave the tea gardens. The labourers who were already in a state of chaos decided to leave the tea estates and ultimately led to mass exodus. They left their gardens with the slogan 'Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jay'. **Kumar, P., B (2006)** Out of 20250 labours employed in the garden as many as 8799 persons that is 43% of the total labour force, left their gardens.

The movement slowly reached the villages of Barak valley too. **Dev Laskar A (2002)** Brahmamoyee Raha, an inspiring lady from village Borkhola located near Silchar spread the message of Swadeshi and

Boycott of the foreign elements among the village women. Her patriotism and patriotic songs helped inspired her younger brother Jatindra Mohan to initiate in the hymns of Swadeshi. Brahmamoyee Raha formed the women organization “Nari Mukti Bahini” which played various important roles during the days of freedom struggle. Many women of the areas got inspired and joined her. Shyamarani Chakraborty, Labanya Chakraborty and Mokshoda Das became close associates of Brahmamoyee. **Datta, Devasree, G (2005)** Suruchi Devi, wife of Jatindra Mohan and sister-in-law of Brahmamoyee also had deep love and consciousness for the motherland. Thought she could not take part in outdoor nationalist activities but she always encouraged her husband. She showed her patriotism in indirect way where she stitched and embroidered the word ‘Bandemataram’ to handkerchief of her husband. Surbala Devi, wife of Ramesh Chandra donated all her ornaments for production of khaddar. The development of spinning and weaving was one of the aims of the Non-Cooperation movement therefore with the money received after selling off the ornaments of Surbaba Devi, a Silpagram was established. Many women even from the weaker section of the society joined the Silpagram.

In various ways women who stayed indoors of Surma Barak valley has shown their patriotism. **Datta, Devasree, H (2005)** In preparation of sweets like *Sandesh* they inscribed the word Bandemataram or Swadeshi or national flag. In other way, the women made the borders of their Saree woven with the colours of national flag and sometimes with Bandemataram. Thus, the women of Barak Valley like that of Brahmaputra valley played important role in the Non-Cooperation movement in all the way they could. Though due to certain social restrictions women did not come out in large numbers for outdoor activities but their nationalist sentiments were expressed in many ways.

CONCLUSION

In the period between 1905 to 1922 the women of Assam played significant roles in the freedom movement of India. In the anti-partition movement, women remained aloof from main stream outdoor activities of propagating Swadeshi and Boycott movement but in their inside world women have definitely showed their love for nation by boycotting the foreign products and adopting the indigenous made products. However, during the Non-Cooperation movement the participation of women increased in large numbers and it became extensive. Despite numerous social bindings of the time many women came out to the call of Gandhiji. It is also a fact that the call for Gandhiji’s programmes of conducting the Non-Violent Non-Cooperation movement suited the women who mostly remained indoor. Thus, Assamese women have played very important role during the national movement. Meanwhile, Gandhiji has called off the Non-Cooperation movement after the Chauri-Chaura incident of 1922. But once the women aroused to the forefront of the freedom struggle there was no looking back. In later years, after the suspension of Non-Cooperation women have continued their active participation in all the programmes of national movement.

References

1. Majumdar, R.C., “*History of the Freedom Movement in India*”, Vol- II, Firm K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963
2. Chakraborty, Ranjan., “*Modern Indian History*”, Readers Service, Kolkata, 2008
3. Goswami, Priyam., “*The History of Assam, From Yandaboo to Partition, 1826-1947*”, Orient Blackswan, 2012.
4. Suman Pandey & Gautam Choubey., “*Women participation in Swadeshi Movement – A Study of Cachar district of South Assam*”, IOSR-JHSS, VOL-20, Issue 7, Ver. VII, July 2015.

5. Barpujari, H.K, Barpujari, S.K & A.C. Bhuyan., “*Political History of Assam*”, Vol-I, Guwahati. 1977.
6. Datta, Devasree., “*Women of Barak Valley and the Indian National Movement*” (unpublished thesis), Gauhati University, 2005.
7. Bhattacharjee, J.M., “*Sreehatter Bhattasangeet*”, Calcutta, 1989.
8. Sharma, Dipti., “*Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle*”, Punthi-Pustak, Calcutta, 1993.
9. Abhinab Nath, Babita Deka, Khogen Gogoi, Mainee Saikia & Himangshu Shekhar Bora., “*Indian Freedom Struggle and the Role of Assamese Women: A Historical Study*”, TOJQI, Vol-12, Issue 1, January 2021
10. Bhattacharjee, J.B., “*Cachar under British Rule in North East India*”, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1971.
11. Thapar, Suruchi., “*Women in the Indian National Movement*”, New Delhi, 2006.
12. Kumar, P., “*State and Society in North East India – A Study of Immigrant Tea Plantation Labourers*”, New Delhi, 2006.
13. S.N., Singh, Amarendra Narain & Purnendu Kumar., “*Socio Economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers*”, New Delhi, 1984.
14. Dev Laskar., “*Jatindramohan O Gram Cacharer Samaj Rajniti O Sanskriti (1901-1919)*”, Calcutta, 2002.