

《論 説》

Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India

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From the ancient period the women of India had been taking active part in politics. In the period of *Vedas* women like Gargi and Maitrayee played active role in Indian politics. In the following period during the reign of the Sultanates and the Mughals women like Sultana Rajiya and Nurjahan looked after the administration of the empire. 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. The socio-economic condition of that time was not favorable for womanhood to take part in the political sphere. The all India Women's Organizations like the *Bharat Mahila Parishad* was established in 1904 and *Bharat Stri Mahamandal* and the Women's Indian Association were established in 1910 and 1917 respectively.

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 concerned 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.

In 1885 the Indian National Congress was established. It provided a common forum for the meeting of people from all parts of the country and formulation of a common program of activity for freedom struggle. It was from this platform that 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 “*Satyagrahi*” 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 arise the conscience of the evildoer. To achieve success the

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Satyagrahi must utterly give up fear, hatred and falsehood. According to him passive resistance was a weapon of the weak while *Satyagraha* was the weapon of the strong. The steps to be followed in the “*Satyagraha*” were suggested by Gandhiji in the following way to make the movement successful.

1. Surrender of titles and all honorary offices under the government.
2. Withdrawal of children from schools and colleges.
3. Boycott of law courts by lawyers and litigants.
4. Refusal of candidates to stand for election in the new legislative councils and of voters to vote.
5. Boycott of foreign goods.¹

At the same time he emphasized the revival of hand spinning and hand weaving, removal of un-touchability, raising the status of women and promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity to face the alien government with a united stand. Once he wrote of the India of his dreams in these words :

I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony... There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability... Women will enjoy the same rights as men... This is the India of my dreams.²

So far as the role of Indian women in Non-cooperation movement was concerned it can be said that up to 1930 the entry of women into the Freedom movement was a limited few. Up to this time, a few women, mostly from the families of the national leaders like C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru or some college students in the large cities had taken part in public political demonstrations. That is why in the “*Young India*” on 30th April, 1930 Gandhiji had appealed to Indian women to take up spinning of yarn on the “*charkha*”, and to come out of their household seclusion and picket government institutions and shops selling foreign goods or liquor.³ As a result more and more women joined the movement and courted arrest. In Delhi alone, which in those days was a socially conservative city, 1600 women were imprisoned for political activity.⁴ In Bombay, middle class women in large numbers joined the movement.⁵ That is why the British observers wrote that if the civil disobedience movement had not accomplished anything else, it had contributed greatly to the social emancipation of Indian women.

Assam the eastern most state of India was noticeably drawn to the national mainstream in 1921 with the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC). Gandhiji’s leadership of the National Congress in 1920 and call for the Non-cooperation movement drew a large number of men and women

1 Embree, A. T., *India's search for National Identity*, Chanakya Publications Delhi, 1980, p 79.

2 Chandra, B., Tripathi, A., Barun, D.E., *Freedom Struggle*, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 1972, pp 129–30.

3 Chandra, B., Tripathi, A., Barun, D. E., *op. cit.*, p 167.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*

throughout the country to the national struggle for freedom. In 1921 Gandhiji visited Assam. It had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam. His good impression of the women of Assam greatly increased the latter's self-confidence and strength of mind.

During this period the Assamese women participated in the movement through the *Assam Chatra Sanmilian* (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.⁶ Large number of women joined the movement by participating in meetings, organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Under the able 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 Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Rajabala Das etc.⁷ 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.

The promotion of spinning and weaving was one of the major constructive program of the Non-cooperation movement. In this regard the achievement of the Assamese women was remarkable. Almost all the women of Assam, irrespective of their caste creed, and status were efficient in spinning and weaving. It was due to the large-scale production of the "*khadi*" by the women, the boycott of foreign clothes was highly successful in Assam. When Gandhiji visited Assam, an Assamese lady known as Bar Raja welcomed him with a nicely woven cloth of hand-spun thread. Gandhiji complimented- "Assam will rise to its full height in the matter of *swadeshi* (National). Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves."⁸ In a meeting held on 18th August 1921 in Guwahati, Gandhiji appealed to all to boycott foreign goods. Accordingly at the end of the meeting he proposed for a bonfire of the foreign clothes.⁹ A large number of women threw away their foreign clothes which they once considered to be precious.

The prohibition of opium and liquor was another important item of Gandhiji's constructive program. The women of Assam also participated in this program by picketing before the opium and liquor shops. Those people who refused to give up intoxication were socially boycotted. Dariki Dasi Baruah, an anti-opium worker of Golaghat was arrested on February 1, 1932 for taking active part in anti-opium picketing programme and was imprisoned for six months. She was in an advanced stage of pregnancy at the time of her arrest. In the jail she suffered from dysentery and finally breathed her last due to miscarriage. The authorities of the Sibsagar jail advised her to appeal for a conditional release, but she straightway refused to comply with the advice till the last

6 Sharma, D., (1) *Assamese women in the freedom struggle*, Calcutta, 1993, pp 34-36.

7 Bhuyan, A., (ed), *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, Das P., 'Women Satyagrahis and the Quit India Movement', Government of Assam, Dispur, Guwahati, 2000, p 146.

8 *ibid.*, Sharma, D., (2) 'Role of Women in the Nationalist Upsurge', p 241.

9 *ibid.*, p 242.

hour of her life.¹⁰ This patriotic woman who left behind the example of strong determination, sacrifice and greatness is yet to find her rightful place amongst the martyrs at the national level.

The contribution to the *Tilak Swaraj Fund* was another important part of constructive program. Assamese women contributed both in cash and kind. Twelve ladies from the Sibsagar town donated all their valuable ornaments to the fund. Instances of parting with diamond rings were also reported. Bhanumati Talukdar, whom Gandhiji called the ‘Sorojini’ of Assam, left her family (husband and children) to work exclusively for the congress.¹¹ A few other devoted workers, like Chandraprova Saikiani of Darrang district, gave up their jobs to participate in the movement actively and effectively.

In 1930, the Civil Disobedience movement was started. It was a period of women’s awakening. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote,

“most of us menfolk were in prison, and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise.”¹²

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. They were Puspalata Das, general secretary of the students’ union of the Panbazar Girls’ High School, Sarala Saxena and Jyotsna Mazumdar. The girls took a pledge to fight for the liberation of the country from alien rule and signed it with their blood.¹³ Thereafter, Sukumari and Parul Moitra, daughter of Suren Moitra— the famous revolutionary from Rajshahi also joined the *Mukti Sangha*.¹⁴ When the school authorities came to know about this Pushpalata Das was expelled from the school.¹⁵

The historic Dandi–march was launched by Gandhiji on 12th March 1930. He started his march from *Sabarmati Ashram* accompanied by 78 selected followers to Dandi on the sea–coast covering 200 miles on foot. There he broke the salt–law by making illegally, but openly, salt from the seawater. As Dandi was too far from Assam so it was not possible for its people to join the march physically. So they extended their moral support by

10 *ibid.*, p 245.

11 *ibid.*

12 *ibid.*, p 243.

13 Bhuyan, A. (ed), *op. cit.*, Bora, S. ‘Role of Students in the Nationalist Upsurge.’, p 231.

14 *ibid.*, Statement of Pushpalata Das.

15 Bora, S., *op. cit.*, p 231.

organizing meetings in different places and took part in symbolic processions and violated government orders and law. Such a symbolic procession of a large number of people including several women was taken out from Kaliabor to Nowgong through a distance of 30 miles violating government orders. The participants were *lathi* charged by the police on their arrival at Nowgong.¹⁶ Women volunteers participating in a picketing in front of the Cotton College at Guwahati were not arrested by the police for the fear that situation might go beyond their control.¹⁷

In 1929, the historic Lahore Congress was held under the presidentship 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 wayside 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 women were beaten up and the national flag was taken away from them. In Sibsagar, a lady named Kamalabala Kakati was arrested and sent to jail for participating in such a procession.¹⁸

The removal of untouchability was another primary objective of the freedom movement. Untouchability was not a major problem in the province of Assam. But the untouchables, the so-called *Harijans*—were not allowed to enter any temple belonging to an orthodox Hindu. Gandhiji undertook a two-week *Harijan* tour of Assam in April 1934. He attended many public meetings organized by the women in different places of Assam. In Jorhat, Giribala Devi an orthodox Brahmin lady opened their private family temple to the *Harijans* in the presence of Gandhiji. Swarnalata Devi, another women from Jorhat was known as “Kasturba (name of Gandhiji’s wife) of Assam” for her devotion to the work of *Harijan* welfare.¹⁹ Many elementary schools and high schools were established in the *Harijan*’s area where the contributions from the women were noteworthy. Swarnalata Barua of Golaghat devoted herself to the popularization of Hindi,²⁰ as it was one of the main agenda in Gandhiji’s constructive program.

Realizing the increasing participation of women in the freedom movement, the congress working committee (CWC) decided in April 1940 to open a women’s wing of the congress at the national and the provincial level. As a result, the women’s wing in Assam was opened in September 1940 with Pushpalata and Amolprova as joint secretaries. It was an important step to drawing more women to the national movement.

The year 1942 was to be a momentous year for the people of Assam as it was to be for other parts of the country. Gandhiji had initiated three struggles to unshackle India from bondage. These were : the Non–

16 *ibid.*

17 Das, P., *op. cit.*, pp 146–47.

18 Sharma, D. (2) *op. cit.*, p 244.

19 *ibid.*, p 246.

20 *ibid.*

cooperation movement (1921), the Civil Disobedience movement (1930) and the Quit India movement (1942). Quit India movement was the third and the last struggle where Gandhiji adopted the slogan 'Do or Die'. In 1939 the great war broke out and tension in the British camp increased after the entrance of Japan into the war at the end of 1941. The rapid advance of the Japanese soldiers through South-east Asia forced all groups to face the impact of an imminent Japanese invasion. China and the United States put pressure on Britain to gain full support of India in its war efforts by granting her demands for an immediate move towards independence. Accordingly Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to India with a proposal that as soon as the war was over steps would be taken to set up an elected body in India to frame a constitution for a new Indian union. It means, it would grant India a dominion status. India was not satisfied with such type of proposals that she would get freedom after the end of the war. Gandhiji called it a "blank cheque on a failing bank."²¹ For Gandhiji, the only possible solution now appeared to be for the British to quit India. The idea had been gradually formulated into the Quit India movement.

The congress working committee, which met at Wardha on 14th July 1942, discussed Gandhiji's idea of launching a mass movement in the country demanding the immediate withdrawal of the British Power from Indian soil. It adopted a resolution to this effect, which was notified in the All India Congress Committee (AICC) session held in Bombay on 7–8 August 1942.²² Immediately, following the adoption of the Quit India resolution, the congress organizations both at the provincial and district levels were asked to gear themselves up for the movement and to enroll volunteers on a large scale. Non payment of taxes and revenue, anti-war propaganda, general strikes to hamper war production and supply, establishment of a parallel government, defiance of the law, boycott, picketing and hunger strikes were cited as probable agenda for the future course of action.²³

Women of Assam joined the movement in large numbers. Many *Satyagrahi* 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 tedious and fruitless. They therefore resorted to a series of 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, who had chosen this revolutionary path, had to face untold miseries. Often they walked for days together without a wink of sleep or a morsel of food, exposing their lives to great risks. In most urban areas the students, both boys and girls continued to play an active part in the underground movement by not only boycotting their educational institutions but also by

21 Embree, A. T., *op. cit.*, p 123.

22 Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, vol. IV, New Delhi, 1983, pp 369–75.

23 Bhuyan, A. (ed), *op. cit.*, Sarma Puzari, R. R., 'The Upheaval of '42 in the Brahmaputra Valley: the Path trodden by the Augusteers', p 166.

24 *ibid.*, p 167.

organizing themselves into Death Squads known as “*Mrityu Bahini*”.²⁴

The women of Assam understood Gandhiji’s concept of ‘Do or Die’ in their own way and participated in all types of activities during the Quit India movement. The Darrang District Congress Committee of Assam decided to hoist the national flag on the police stations and the court buildings, which were the symbols of British authority. Accordingly, the plan was drawn under the leadership of Pushpalata Das to hoist the national flag on 20th September in Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Bihali and Sootea. It was decided to come out in processions consisting of men and women from nearby villages and to proceed for flag hoisting. The police opened fire on the peaceful processionists at Gohpur and Dhekiajuli. Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Devi and Kamuli Devi died of bullet injuries on the spot and many others were badly injured. About the participation of women in these programs the Gopinath Bordoloi Committee report says :

What is unique is that, in these daring acts women took an active part and were always in the forefront.²⁵

Amid such violence caused by the police, Tileswari Mahanta, a daring women volunteer successfully hoisted the national flag at Bihali police station.²⁶

Besides Darrang district, in some other places like North Lakhimpur, Jorhat etc. attempts were made to hoist the national flag on government buildings. On 15th October 1942, eighty women from the villages near Teok made an abortive attempt to attack the police station without any leader of importance.²⁷ The women of Borpeta district attacked the Patacharkuchi police station and assaulted the police officer in retaliation to the police firing.

Most of the Assamese women generally participated in the movement on Gandhian non-violent line. But some of them being disappointed with the Gandhian methods became involved in underground and extremist activities. In the Sibsagar district, Aikan Bhuyan of Mudoijan near Teok took the lead in setting fire to the Amguri High School. She conducted several secret meetings where she reportedly instigated a number of congress youths to damage government properties. While the saboteurs were engaged in their demolition activities she often volunteered for patrolling duty.²⁸ The local congress entrusted the task of carrying top secret messages from one place to another to Sudhalata Dutta and Reboti Lahon, 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.²⁹ During one such errand Reboti Lahon developed pneumonia and breathed her last while walking from Boloma to Ghiladhari.³⁰ Braving all hazards, the girls in the course of their visits to various

25 Sharma, D. (2) *op. cit.*, p 248.

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*

28 Sarma Puzari, *op. cit.*, p 174.

29 Statement made by Sudhalata Dutta in the course of an interview with the author at Kolakhowa in Jorhat on 24th April 1994.

30 Interview with Sudhalata Dutta.

places with secret messages also propagated the idea of underground movement, even in the remotest areas of Assam. In Nowgong district Jaymati Saikia cooperated 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 security of the underground male workers.³¹ Brajnath Sarma's wives, Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi helped their husband and his underground party workers to carry on their sabotage activities by providing them with food and shelter.³² 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.³³ Educated girls belonging to the secret groups were used in transmitting secret circulars and bulletins. Another women, Budheswari Hazarika took an active part in sinking cargo boats carrying military supplies through the Brahmaputra river.³⁴

During the year 1942 complete Police Raj was instituted in Assam and the people were subjected to untold misery. The police were given unlimited power of repression to control the movement. The sufferings of the women of Assam during this period 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 heinous police outrages, which included mass raping and molestations. 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.³⁵ In this way, women were tortured both physically and mentally in various ways.

Thus beginning with a limited participation in the 1921 phase, the involvement of women in the subsequent phases of the movement became massive in scale and similar in nature to that of the male participants. It was for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were afraid of was not Gandhiji but the innumerable illiterate women of India who became the mouthpiece of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could suppress such an awakening.

31 Sarma Puzari, *op. cit.*, p 174.

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.*

34 *ibid.*

35 Sharma, D (2), *op. cit.*, p 250.

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In this paper an attempt is being made to evaluate and elucidate the role of the women of Assam in the freedom struggle of India. The year 1920 had witnessed the outbreak of the great nationalist movement in India under the leadership of Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi to make India free from the British bondage. Assam's contribution to the struggle of Independence as one of its provinces was not in any way less than the rest of the country. Along with the men, the women of Assam also responded to each and every phases of the freedom movement launched by Gandhiji, namely, the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920 / 21), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and the Quit India Movement (1942). They participated in the movement by organizing processions and picketings and undertaking tours to the remotest areas to propagate the message of the movement. They whole-heartedly undertook Gandhiji's constructive programs like spinning and weaving in large scale along with the task of removal of untouchability and popularization of Hindi as a national language. That is why the glory of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam is attributed to the women. In 1942, the Assamese women perhaps surpassed all other women of the country in respect of courage and sacrifice. During this period they participated in the movement both on non-violent Gandhian way and the revolutionary way. The revolutionary group of women helped their male counterparts in cutting telephone and telegraph lines, burning government buildings and damaging bridges to paralyze the British administration. Such activities led the government to take repressive measures to suppress the women folk. They were harassed both mentally and physically, which in turn aroused the common people to fight for the noble cause of freedom.