PARTICIPATION OF ASSAMESE WOMEN IN THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE WOMEN OF DARRANG DISTRICT

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Abstract

“Quit India”, this simple but powerful slogan, launched the legendary struggle which also became famous by the name “August Revolution”. At a special session of the All India Congress Committee held at Bombay on 7th and 8th August, 1942, the historic Quit India resolution was adopted. The participation of women in large numbers in this movement was one of its most important features. The participation of women in the freedom struggle was increasing day by day, more particularly after 1930, throughout the country. In Assam, many women had to take the leadership of the Quit India Movement after the arrest of all the prominent leaders of the state within a few days of the adoption of the Quit India resolution. Women came out of their houses and took active part in processions, demonstrations and picketing.

Darrang district of Assam played a significant role in India’s struggle for independence. The people of the district contributed significantly to the success of the freedom movement of India. Apart from rearing up their children and doing their household duties they took equal part with the males in various programmes of the freedom movement. A number of works have been done on the Assamese nationalism and Assam’s role in the National Movement, but research on the role of women in the freedom struggle is still ignored. During the Quit India Movement, the women of the district of Darrang made immense contribution.

Keywords: Assamese women, British, Gandhi, Quit India Movement.

1. INTRODUCTION

India’s struggle for freedom under the leadership of Gandhiji was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements in the history of the world. Gandhiji launched three movements of all India character against the British rulers during his steward ship of the Indian National Congress from 1919 to 1947. These are the Non Cooperation Movement of 1921, the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. In 1939 the Second World War broke out. The War time Viceroy Lord Linlithgow without consulting the Central Assembly or Peoples Representatives declared India to be at war.¹ That declaration

¹ Chandra Bipan (1989); India’s Struggle for Independence, p. 449-452
vehemently protested by the Congress and said it would cooperate in the war if India was declared as an independent country. On the contrary, the Colonial Government had agreed to modify the 1935 Act after the war was over, in protest Congress ministries resigned in seven provinces. Due to the change of war scenario, Congress offered to co-operate with British Government if a provisional National Government was set up at Centre and the right to independence was recognized. On August 4 British Government offered to expand the Executive Council of Viceroy with more Indian members and after war a representative Indian body to frame constitution. The Congress rejected this proposal. With the entry of Japan on the opposite side of England and their march nearer to India generated alarm. Due to pressure of President Roosevelt of United States of America and Chiang Kai Shek of China, British Government sent Sir Stafford Cripps to solve the deadlock. The proposal of Cripps failed to satisfy the demands of people. So Gandhi now asked for complete British withdrawal from India.

At a special session of the AICC held at Bombay on 7th and 8th August 1942 the historic “Quit India” resolution was adopted. The Congress sanctioned an indefinite non-violent mass struggle on the widest possible scale under Gandhi’s leadership.

1.1 OBJECTIVES
The main objectives of this work are –

i) To trace the role played by the women of Assam in the Quit India Movement with special reference to the women of Darrang district.

ii) To study the participation and contribution of the women martyr of Darrang district who has not yet received the recognition they deserve.

1.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- “Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle” by Dr. Dipti Sharma deals with the women’s participation in the freedom struggle in different phases in Assam.

- “The History of Assam (From Yandaboo to Partition, 1826-1947)” by Priyam Goswami discusses the history of the colonial province of Assam and the growth of political consciousness in the region and the impact of the pan-Indian national movement by the society.

- Some valuable and scattered information on the role of Assam in the quit India movement are available in works of Sir Edward Gait, in his “History of Assam”.

- Puspalata Das in her article published in “ChintaSarobor” share her feelings about the events of Gohpur and Dhekiajuli Thana in 1942.

1.3 METHODOLOGY
The study is descriptive in nature and based on various secondary sources like Journals, News papers, reports, text books and Internet.

2. QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT AND ASSAM
“Do or die” was the mantra which Gandhi gave to the people of India. However, even before the Congress could start the movement, the British administrative machinery came down heavily on the protestors. All the major leaders of India were arrested and the Congress itself was declared illegal. A dismayed India reacted spontaneously against this repressive action of the British. Despite lack of direct leadership, large scale protests and demonstration were held all over the country.
In Assam, the Quit India movement started with Gandhian non-violent methods of protests like hartals, processions, demonstrations, picketing and hoisting of the Congress flag on Government buildings. As the movement progressed and police violence increased, there was a general atmosphere of rebellion. The people attacked government buildings, damaged railway tracks and sabotaged military supply lines. Within a week of declaration of the quit India resolution, all important congress leaders including Md. Tayebullah, Gopinath Bordoloi, Sinddhi Nath, Pitamber Dev Goswami etc. were arrested. But it was not able to stop the Assamese people. In the early part of 1942, the APCC had built up an efficient volunteer organization, i.e. the SantiSena, consisting of about 20,000 workers mostly drawn from the rural areas. The purpose of the SantiSena organization was to carry out the constructive works and to maintain peace and order in the villages in the time of war. At first, the SantiSena organization was not a direct challenge to the Government authority. But gradually it becomes so popular that it posed a challenge to the existence of the parallel official bodies like the village defense party. The existence of the SantiSena becomes irritating to the Government because it was a creation of the Congress. This led the Government to declare the SantiSena organization unlawful along with the Congress organization at all levels.

3. PARTICIPATION OF ASSAMESE WOMEN

The nationalist movement as led by Gandhi was based on non-violence. Metaphorically the streets were viewed as moral battlefields and this ideology guided women to step over the thresholds of their homes. When most of the men-folk were in prison women came forward to take charge of the struggle. Uneducated and educated women sacrificed time and materials, volunteering, campaigning, protesting, fasting and donating to the causes of freedom.

The women of Assam played a very important role in the Quit India Movement. Women came out in large members and took active part in processions, demonstration and picketing. Many of them were enrolled as members of the SantiSena. As the male leaders were put in jails, women organizers who were left outside, shouldered the responsibility of organizing the movement. A small but determined section of woman was much more radical in their activities. Violence and sabotage were their weapons of choice. In 1942, the Mrityu Bahini (Suicide Squad) was formed to carry out subversive activities in a more organized manner.

The activities of the women participant of Nowgong, Darrang, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Kamrup, Golaghat etc. were most remarkable in the history of the Quit India movement. The Quit India Movement was launched in Nowgong with undaunted spirit and courage. The most prominent woman leader of this district was Bhogeswari Phukanani. On 18th September 1942, a community prayer and a feast were arranged by the people of Barhampur to celebrate the event of recapturing a ShantiSena Camp. When the feast was in progress, suddenly a military party appeared there and without giving any opportunity to the people to explain the purpose of their assembly, chased and attacked the people with lathis and guns. The villagers started shouting slogans. On hearing the slogans, the women folk of the village could understand that some danger had come to the people assembled in the camp. Women of the nearby villages who were always ready to take the quickest possible action without losing time, immediately rushed, in groups, to the camp premises with tricolor in their hands. Ratnabala Phukan, a twelve year old girl who was in the front of the procession tried her utmost to save the flag from being grounded after some military person tried to take the flag away from her hand. Bhogeswari Phukanani, the old mother of Ratnabala seeing her daughter

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2Bordoloi Committee Report, p.3
endangering her life and that the national flag was going to be dishonored, struck with all her might with a bamboo stick on the head of the Captain Finish who was in charge of the operation. Insulted and infuriated, Captain Finish drew out his revolver and shot at BhogeswariPhukanani at a close range. BhogeswariPhukanani got serious injuries on her forehead and succumbed to the injuries three days later.

Guneswari Devi of Kaliabar was another heroic woman who fought for freedom with great dedication. She took extensive tours of the Brahmaputra valley districts along with other workers to organize the people. Women everywhere and every time displayed their determination and fearlessness. There were hundreds of courageous women like EnamaiBoro, JyotimaiSaikia, MaidhanSaikia, Damayanti Bora, Daivali Das, HemankantiSaikia and many others of this district had showed their determination and fearlessness in the Quit India Movement.

In North Lakhimpur, the Quit India Movement was by and large a non-violent Movement. BuddheswariHazarika was the most important women leader. She had took the leadership of the women which were assembled on 20th September, 1942 to hoist the congress flag on the Thana Building of North Lakhimpur. A large number of girls who were in front of the processing were injured in the lathi charge. In another programme of procession on 7th October 1942, the women had to become the victims of the police brutalities. Buddheswari Hazarika, Hemeswari Phukan, Dhanada Barua and Nandeswari were some of the women who were maltreated by the police, LeelaNeogoni, another women volunteer was injured by police and she died after two months as a result of this beating.

Like in most other part of the state processing, meeting and picketing were the main means through which the women of Golaghat and Sivsagar participated in the 1942 movement. In Sivsagar women participation in procession and meeting is noteworthy. A large number of participants, including women were injured during these procession. Maibala Baruah, Aideu Bala Baruah, AidhaniSaikia, Ratneswari Devi, NanibalaSaikia, DevajaniBoruah and few others women were seriously injured during a peace procession in Teok.3 On the other hand the women of Golaghat participated in different types of activities and a few of them worked underground. AmalPravaBarua, wife of the underground worked Sankar Chandra Barua, was one of the most important women workers. She helped the ShantiSenas by keeping the archery materials in her custody. Police harassment was a regular part of her life during period.

She carried on organizational activities mostly in the interior village and tea gardens. She and her colleagues were under strict eyes of the police. In order to avoid the risk of being caught by the police or detected by the people of the European Tea planters, they had to walk through jungles, tea bushes, interior and undeveloped village routes, muddy drains and paddy fields. In each village, they could at least enroll one volunteer from each household in spite of these constant threats of Police. This was a great achievement on their part Annapravabarua also took the initiative in organizing the MrityuBahini members in the neighbouring villages of Golaghat, particularly among women. PurankantiBarua, AmbikaBarua, Sarumai Das, Lalita Das, ChenehiGogoi, RahilaGogoi, DevalataHazarika, Bimala Bora, KaminiBoro etc. were some of the most active women workers of Golaghat during the Quit India Movement.

The women of Kamrup district also joined in large numbers in the Quit India Movement with the bold leadership of Chandra PravaSaikiani. She was the sole guiding force behind the great upheavals in Bajali and Barpeta areas. She had to face the brutality of the police force many times, as an underground volunteer. She was also involved in different literary works with a view to arouse consciousness among the people.

3Report of the Enquiry Committee of Freedom Fighters, Govt. of Assam, 1979
Hemaprava Das, Amalprava Das and Saruplata Choudhury were another three most important women leader of Kamrup district. Amalprava Das was never in favor of sabotage activities but she, however, provided shelter to Jyotiprasad Agarwala when he was absconding.4

At Nalbari, on 14th August 1942, a large crowd, including women with flags in their hands, collected in front of the Nalbari Police station and protested the arrest of the leaders. Ratnapriya of Nalbari district was an example of the courage born of patriotism in an Assamese village woman.

Apart from participating in processions and meetings, women contributed to the movement in other ways also. During the 1942-1944 periods, the government imposed heavy censorship on all letters and other communication. So, in every place of Assam, some selected girls were entrusted to the service of courier for the underground movement communications. Sudhalata Dutta of Jorhat, Reboti Lahan of Teok and Dhanada Baruah of Lakhimpur were entrusted with the task of carrying top secret letters. Again providing shelter to the underground congress workers was another great risk that the women throughout Assam had undertaken.

3.1 PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF DARRANG DISTRICT

Darrang district of Assam played a significant role in India’s struggle for independence. In this district the leaders like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Gajen Barua, Phani Sharma etc. prepared the plans and programmes of the movements against the British Government.5 District level leaders namely Gohan Ch. Goswami, Omio Kr. Das, Bijoy Ch. Bhagawati, Mahadev Sharma, Chandra Kant Deka Borua etc. visited the whole district for the purpose of inspiring the villagers to take part activity in the freedom movement. The whole responsibility of organizing the women in the district was entrusted on Pushpalata Das along with her husband Omeo Kumar Das and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. They planned to carry on the struggle purely on non violent lines as desired by Gandhiji who under no circumstances would compromise with violence. But after the mass arrest of the congress workers, most of the congress leaders who were not yet arrested preferred to work underground. Pushpalata Das however was an exception. Puspalata Das wanted to work openly because she was convinced that secrecy had no place in Gandhiji’s concept of non violence. She warned the congress volunteers not to indulge in any kind of violence even in the face of extreme provocation from the Government.

The Satyagrahis of Darrang district were divided into two groups, viz. the Santi Bahini and the Mrityu Bahini. Although the members of both the forces were wedded to the motto of ‘Do or Die’ the members of the Mrityu Bahini were required to observe absolute secrecy and firmness. Many women of Darrang district came forward to enroll themselves as a member of the Mrityu Bahini.

On 18th September, 1942, Puspalata Das accompanied by Jogesh Mishra of Bihar addressed a meeting at Barangbari near Gohpur. The Darrang District Congress Committee had already chosen 20th September as the day for hoisting the National flag on the Thana building in Darrang district. This decision was announced by Puspalata Das in the meeting at Barangbari. As per programme, one of the Mrityu Bahini volunteer was to lead the procession to the thana with the national flag in hand and the leader was instructed not to look behind but to advance forward in any circumstances.6

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5 Sonitpur through Ages, Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti, Tezpur
6 Sharma, Anil(2007): Quit India Movement in Assam
3.2 THE GOHPUR FIRING AND KANAKLATA

During the quit India movement one of the heroic women who come to the forefront and became immemorial through martyrdom was Kanaklata Barua of Gohpur. She was born on 22nd December 1924 in Barangari village of Darrang district.

Some political events like “ChaiduarRyotSabha” under the leadership of JyotiprasadAgarwala in 1931 influenced Kanaklata very much. She was also influenced by leaders like Cheniram Das, Mohin Chandra Singha, Lakhidhar Sharmahand Madhav Sharmah. Further her maternal uncle DebendraNath Bora and Jaduram Bora were active congress workers who very often visited her house and had talks with her about various programmes of Gandhiji. Naturally such words as “Mahatma Gandhi”, ‘Congress’, ‘Independence’ became familiar with her since her childhood. Kanaklata thought of fighting for freedom from the core of her heart. At that time Kalyanpur Camp under KalyanpurMouza was the main camp of the freedom movement and KanaklataBarua joint the volunteers. Kanaklata was most influenced by the speech of Puspalata Das in the meeting which was held on 18th September 1942 near Kanaklata’s village. After listening to the speech, Kanaklata was thrilled by the spirit of patriotism and sacrifice. She could not resist her desire to serve the motherland even at the cost of her life. Puspalata Das and other congress members were hesitating to enroll such a young girl in the Mrityu Bahini. But Kanaklata was determined and she succeeded in her effort. Thus, she won the destination of becoming the first girl member of the Mrityu Bahini not only in her home district but also in the whole province of Assam.7

On 20th September, 1942 Kanaklata led a big procession to the Gohpur Thana to hoist the national flag in the Thana compound. The Gohpur Thana was at the easternmost boundary of the Tezpur sub-division. So the volunteers and the people from the villages like Brahmajani, Hawajan, Halem, Kalabari, Gohpur etc. had joined in that procession.8 It was estimated that about 500 women from the neighboring villages participated in that procession. All the women were in the forefront of the procession. The procession was unique in style and spirit and was able to touch the heart of everyone and attract more and more people. When the crowd reached at the Gohpur Police Thana, the Officer-in-Charge of the Police Station Rebati Mohan Shome, came out with a band of armed constables and warned the processionist not to advance even a step forward. But the crowd was determined to hoist the flag and as a result of it they had to face the utmost level of brutality from the police. Police opened fire on the peaceful, unarmed and disciplined crowd without any warming or dispersal order. The first round of fire that came from the gun of a constable named Bagai Koch and a fatal shot pierced through the heart of the young girl Kanaklata died instantly on the spot. MukundaKakoti who attempted to hoist the flag after Kanaklata also had the same faith many of processionist were injured.

The sacrifice of Kanaklata and Mukunda became a source of inspiration for the people of Assam and India as well.

3.3 DHEKIAJULI PROCESSION

On 20th September 1942, a huge crowd assembled at Dhekiajuli from the villages within jurisdiction of Dhekiajuli Police Station for the purpose of hoisting the national flag. But the police immediately opened fire on the Thana. The firing instantly killed 6 persons within the Thana compound and injured many. In that procession, the women in the front at

7 Barooah, D.P: Biranari, p.5
8 Bora, H.(ed)2009: BiyallisorMuktijuararuChaiduar
the beginning but after the lathi charge, they were asked to move to the rear, when the crowd started running, some of the women being unable to flee from the police firing fell victim of Police brutality.

**Kumali Devi:** Kumali Devi was one of the victim of the Dhekiajuli firing. She was born in 1874. Her father was Late Bhuliram Nath and mother was Late Amiyo Nath. This 66 years old Kumali Devi also joined the March to Dhekiajuli Thana along with the crowd. When the police attempted to gun her son Golok Neog, She came forward and save her son receiving the bullet herself. It is a rare example of both patriotism and mother’s love for children.

**Tileswari Barua:** Tisleswari Barua was another victim of the Dhekiajuli episode of 20th September, 1942. She was born in the year 1930 in the village named Boragaon of Dhekiajuli. Her father was Late Bhabakanta Barua. She accompanied her uncle in the procession. She was the youngest women martyr in the Dhekiajuli firing, who was only twelve years old.

**Khahuli Devi:** Khahuli Devi of Dhekiajuli also sacrificed her life for the freedom of the country. She was born in the year 1920 at Dumduma village of Nowgong district. She got married with Late Ponaram Nath of Karani village of Naharani Mauza at the age of 21. This couple joined the procession marched to Dhekiajuli Thana leaving their kids alone at home.

In Dhekiajuli, the police fired about 20 rounds of bullet causing death and injuries to several men and women. They even chase the fleeing people and fired on them from behind. What was more horrifying was that they stripped off the injured women and reportedly tried to molest them. Many of the women reached their homes almost in a naked condition. Muhila Devi, Sitoi Devi, Soneswari Devi and few others were a few of such victims. Jetuki Devi, Domili Devi and Thato Kachariani are the examples of women who received serious injuries as a result of the Lathi charge.

### 3.4 PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF SOOTEA

The participation of women of Sootea in the Quit India Movement was remarkable. It was a village of Darrang district. New groups of women of Sootea in large number came out to join the Movement. A strong “Mohila Mrityu Bahini”, consisting of about 350 girls and women was formed in Sootea under the leadership of Swarnaprova Mahanta.

On 20th September, a large crowd assembled in front of the Sootea Thana and hoisted the national flag. It is claimed that the people of Sootea were the first in the country to hoist the national flag on any Government building. Some of the important active participants of this procession were Guneswari Bhuyan, Premoda Bormudoi, Labanya Devi, Basumati Koch, Padumilata Barua, Dineswari Hazarika, Purnada Devi, Koseswari Devi and Padmini Barua.

### 3.5 PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF MANGALDOI

On 9th September 1942, a women’s procession was taken out in Mangaldoi in Darrang district to protest against British rule and in support of the Quit India Resolution. A group of women picketed in front of the Mangaldoi sub-divisional court building. The S.D.O. accompanied by police men arrived at the venue and misbehaved with the women picketers. Then two brave young girl, Jonai and Urmila, went inside the office and dragged S.D.O. out of his office for misbehaved with the women.⁹

The women of Mangaldoi took the responsibility of providing the Santi Senas with food and shelter in the period of their vigilance duties. Jasoda Keotani is an example of one

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such women who was caught by the police while supplying food to the SantiSenas and she was badly assaulted. Many women of Darrang were arrested during the course of the Quit India Movement. Purnada Devi, Ratneswar Devi, GolapiBhuayan and PadumilataGohainbaruah were some of the women then arrested and sentenced to Rigorous Imprisonment (RI) for various terms.

Thus the women of Darrang district as well as Assam played a very important role in India’s final struggle for independence. Mahatma Gandhi had rightly remarked “when the history of India’s fight for independence comes to be written the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place.”

4. CONCLUSION

Generally the activities and sacrifices of the frontline national leaders who led the general people to fight against the British rule are remembered and homage is paid to them. But there are a large number of freedom fighters who are rarely remembered. In fact, the contribution of the frontline leaders as well as the grassroot level workers in the freedom movement of India was equally important. The success of any movement started by the frontline leaders depended upon the active participation of the general workers in it and where there were active and brave grass root level workers, the movement of the place was definitely a successful one.

In the whole phase of the freedom movement, especially in the Quit India Movement, the women of Darrang district took a significant part. The Quit India Movement brought the women folk of the district to the apex of the freedom struggle. Particularly, under the leadership of Puspalata Das some of the women showed exemplary courage and devotion for their motherland by directly participating in the movement while some others by joining the MrityuBahini. In Darrang district many women patriotic figures established examples of supreme sacrifice of their lives in Quit India Movement. These women martyrs of the 1942 Movement were the symbols of bravery and patriotism and need exposure to the young talents.

The police were given unlimited power of repression during this period. So the suffering of the women of Assam during the period of Quit India Movement crossed all limits. Beating, slapping, kicking, insulting with the use of filthy language, forcefully entering the house during night hours and misbehaving with the women etc. were the common methods adopted by the police for the suppression of the women folk. According to the Bordoloi Committee Report on atrocities committed in 1942, at least eighty women of the Brahmaputra Valley were victims of such heinous police outrages, which included mass raping and molestations. Pregnant women also could not escape military brutality. In this way women were tortured both physically and mentally in various ways.

But these sacrifices of the women were not getting due respect and recognition that they deserved because of the ignorance of the people at large. Some initiative could pave the way for the national recognition of these less fortunate freedom fighters and martyrs, who still remain unknown to the people of the nation. Efforts should be made by scholars to take the names of the women of Assam and their activities to the national and international level through research works or an in depth study on the regional variations of the Quit India Movement in Assam and the sacrifices made by the women for the freedom of the country.

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