



## RETHINKING THE ROLE OF WOMEN OF NAGAON DISTRICT IN THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT'

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**Abstract:** After the Non-Cooperation and Civil-Disobedience Movement, the Quit India Movement beginning on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942 has usually been regarded as the third great struggle of the people of India for freedom from the independence of British rule. Indeed, the Quit India Movement was a mass upsurge of unprecedented dimensions which expedited the liberation of the country. During the Quit India Movement the people of Assam like that of other parts of India offered positive response to the call of Gandhi's 'Do or Die'. Irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender and community people from all districts came forward to the national call, a few became martyr and thousands faced police atrocities and thus made remarkable contribution to the success of the mass movement. In this course of struggle, the women of Nowgong (present Nagaon) district played a prominent role. Many women were found to be holding Congress flags and shouting Congress slogans in different parts of Nagaon who even faced severe police atrocities. In this paper an attempt has been made to portray the actual happenings and the participation of the womenfolk of Nagaon in the Quit India Movement and also to highlight the role of women volunteers who engaged themselves in constructive, organizational, public awareness activities in the said movement from its local perspective .

**Key words:** Assam, Movement, Nagaon, National, Women.

**Introduction:** The 'women question' figured prominently in the colonial discourses regarding India as western observers like James Mill, used it to construct a 'civilization critique of India' (Chakrabarty. D, 2000, p.54). They considered the degraded condition of Indian women as an indicator of India's inferior status in the hierarchy of civilizations (*Ibid*). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century both the western and modern Indian intellectuals included the status of women as one of their important agenda and tried to eradicate the evil practices connected with women from the society. As a result of their role, female infanticide was banned, sati was abolished and widow remarriage was legalized. Again a movement for female education was started as a part of the 'colonized males' in search for the 'new women'. Geraldine Forbes has classified three important sections of the society who took initiative to spread education among women, 'the British rulers, Indian male reformers and educated Indian women' (Forbes. Geraldine, 2004, p. 64).

At the initiative of Gandhi positive attitude was taken for the active participation of women in the Indian Nationalist movement. As Gandhi believed that the 'natural division of labour' between the sexes and women had a duty not only to look after the hearth and home but from within their obtained sphere, they could serve the nation by spinning, by picketing at foreign cloths and liquor shops." (Kishwar. Madhu, 'Gandhi on women', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1985).

During the course of the Quit India movement (1942), the women of Assam like that of other parts of India offered positive response to the call of Gandhi's 'Do or Die'. Women from all districts came forward to the national call, a few became martyr and thousands faced police atrocities and thus made remarkable contribution to the success of this mass movement. In this course of struggle, the women of Nowgong (present Nagaon) district played a prominent role. Many women were found to be holding Congress flags and shouting Congress slogans in different parts of Nagaon who even faced severe police atrocities.

### **Objectives:**

The Objective of this paper is

1. To portray the actual happenings and the participation of the womenfolk of Nagaon in the Quit India Movement.
2. To highlight the role of women volunteers who engaged themselves in constructive, organizational, public awareness activities in the said movement from its local perspective.

### **Methodology:**

1. Basically Historical methodology is adopted for the work.
2. Multi – disciplinary approaches are adopted.
3. An extensive study of existing literature is conducted.

As the National level organizations like the *Bharat Mahila Parisad* (1904), *Bharat Stri Mahamandal* (1910) and the *Women's Indian Association* (1917) had no branches in Assam, some progressive Assamese women felt the necessity for the establishment of women organization in the province. In 1915, the first formal organization of women in Assam, *Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti* came into being (Bhuyan. Arun, (edt.) 2000, p. 241).

In 1926, *Assam Mahila Samiti* was formed under the leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani with its branches in several parts of the province with the objectives of enlisting the participation of a large number of women in different types of activities of the freedom movement in an organized manner and emphasized the need for boycotting foreign goods (Sharma. D, 1993, pp. 34-36).

In the struggle that followed during the year 1942-43, the Assamese women in general took a leading part with their male counterparts. Under the leadership of

leading organizers and patriots like Nabinchandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya and Chandrakumar Agarwalla etc. some progressive women came out to take part in the struggle. *Mrityu Bahini* (Death-corps) and *Shanti Bahinis* (Peace-corps) were formed in different districts of Assam and women joined in these organizations in large numbers (Bora. S, 2013, p. 85). They offered both the individual and collective *Satyagrahas* ( Bhuyan. Arun, (edt.) 2000, p. 247). It was recorded that in the month of January 1941, alone 17 women offered Satyagraha in Assam, of whom seven were convicted, seven were arrested but released on the same day (*Ibid*). The number of women Satyagrahis increased gradually and by the end of 1940, the number of such women from Guwahati, Goalpara, Mangoldoi, Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat and Nowgong rose to 1192 (*Ibid*). They opened many training centres in different places of Assam and tried to make the rural women concious about their rights and duties (*Ibid*). Women leaders like Hemantakumari devi Bordoloi, Poetess Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharyya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Snehalata Devi Baruah, Chandraprova Devi Saikiani and Rajbala Das who was the secretary of *Dibrugarh Women's Congress Committee* of those days undertook extensive tours from village to village to educate and inspire the people (*Ibid*, p.146).

The women of Nowgong district (present Nagaon) participated in all types of activities during the 1942 movement. In 1942, a women's force or *Nari Bahini* was formed in Nowgong. The most prominent members of this force were Dharmeswari Borkataki, Tarulata Das, Panilata Saikia, Janiki Saikia, Sumila Saikia, Pramila Bora, Padmawati Saikia, Daiman Das, Dharmeswari Das, Elashi Bora, Bhugila Bora, Sariful Bora, Maniki Kalita, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Ratna Phukan, Dukhuni Bora etc (Keot. L, 1995, p.186). By organizing picketing in front of the shops dealing in liquor, opium, etc. they even struck terror into the hearts of colonial rulers. When Chandraprobha Saikiani had left for Barpeta; Guneswari Devi, wife of Ganeshchandra Borthakur of Jakhalabandha shouldered the leadership of the Nowgong women and spent a year and a half in Tezpur jail where she fell seriously ill and eventually her colleague, Dariki Kachari met her death in jail because of an attack of blood dysentery and thus left her impact in the history of freedom movement (Bhuyan. Arun, (edt.) 2000, p. 147). The sufferings of these caste Hindu as well as from backward community proved to be a source of further inspiration to the movement which spread over the nook and corner of the province and later on became a golden chapter of sacrifices of women in the history of freedom movement.

Although most of the women of Assam participated in the movement on non-violent lines, a few of them however became engaged in underground and extremist activities. In Nowgong , Jaimati Saikia of Chakalaghat village, cooperated with the revolutionary group to burn the Bebejia Road Bridge on 25/26 August, 1942 (*Ibid*, p.174). Girls like Pitrani Saikia, Kali Saikia, Punimai Saikia and Dagati Bora worked for the security of the underground male workers (*Ibid*). Abali Kuchuni of Morigaon of Nowgong district died as a result of police beating on charge of setting fire to the Government Inspection Bungalow at Monoha (Deka. S. N, *edt.* 1972, p.14).It indicates that the women of Nagaon district made notable contributions towards

the cause of country's freedom. They played active part in mass procession, organized several meeting and carried out picketing whenever they felt the necessity.

With the arrest of the Congress leaders, the women took charge of the situation and carried on the movement by bearing the brunt of the wrath of the Raj. When complete police Raj was instituted in Assam and the police was given unlimited power of repression who did not hesitate to adopt all possible coercive measures to demoralize the people, the women of Assam showed exemplary courage. More particularly, whenever to suppress them the police and military adopted the common methods like beating, kicking, slapping, forcefully entering the house during night hours, insulting and misbehaving with them and their sufferings crossed all limits, they strongly faced the situation and perhaps surpassed all other women of the country. 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 (Bhuyan. Arun, (edt.) 2000, p. 250).

Even girls at the age of puberty, pregnant women could not escape from military brutality. As a result of military and police assault a few cases of miscarriage and birth of stillborn babies were recorded, in the report (*Ibid*). They were tortured, both physically and mentally in various ways and the women of all districts of Assam had to suffer these atrocities.

Like other parts of the province, the women of the Nowgong district also had to face severe police atrocities and it is said that they were subjected to inhuman brutalities (*Ibid*). Many of them had to spend their nights in the deep jungle, for fear of police atrocities. Bhogeswari Phukanani died, shot by Captain Finch, while she was trying to save the national flag from being dishonoured (*Ibid*, p. 248). But in spite of the repressive measures taken by the Government, ironically drew large number of women to fight for the noble cause of freedom.

As the constructive programme was one of the most effective tools of the Gandhian concept to achieve independence, the idea of opening a permanent centre for constructive workers had struck in the minds of Assamese women and they showed special interest in the constructive programmes. In 1940, Hemprava Das and Amalprova Das started *The Gram Sevika Ashram* in Sarania, in Guwahati, named after Kasturba Gandhi which was a *Constructive Work Centre* and *Women's Training Institute* formally opened by Gandhi in 1946 (*Ibid*, p. 250). All those initiatives also shaped the movement for women's rights which changed their perspective towards life, their world view, self-image and their ambition ( Bora. S. 2013, p. 89). In fact the British Prime Minister had declared in 1930, that who they were afraid of was not Gandhiji, but of 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. (Bhuyan, Arun, 2000, p.150). From Jorhat, Krishnanath Sarma's daughter Sarojini Devi, who was in *Wardha Mahila Ashram*

during 1942 movement, courted imprisonment and was in Nagpur Jail. After her release she died in *Wardha Ashram* and her tomb in Wardha is a reminder of her sacrifice. She was adored by all the inmates of *Wardha Ashram* including Gandhiji (*Ibid*, p. 151).

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that with limited scope and restrictions, the role played by the women of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Freedom Struggle was indeed remarkable. Their involvement in the movement became massive in scale and similar in nature with that of the male participants. It was the *Assam Mahila Samiti*, formed in 1926, which provided the launching pad for women's participation in a more organised manner. In the 1942 upheaval, in terms of their courage and sacrifice the women of Assam and particularly Nagaon district perhaps surpassed all other women of the country. When most of the Congress leaders were arrested, the women took charge of the situation and carried on the movement by bearing the brunt of the wrath of the Raj and their sufferings knew no bounds. The very fact that fifteen women of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam laid down their lives, for the cause of the movement between 1921 to 1947, alone speaks volumes of their remarkable contribution towards the attainment of Swaraj for India. But the women's participation in different activities of the freedom movement and their success against the British rule hardly received the priority it deserved. The new generations also simply know the great names of the freedom struggle of India but to a great extent are still ignorant of this marginalized section, their participation, contribution and sacrifices who were too instrumental in making India a free nation. It has become essential to reread, reinterpret and restate the role of women of each and every locality of India in different phases of the freedom struggle with a view to restoring a new spirit and enthusiasm and reconstructing the integration among people of different parts of the country, with their own story of contribution towards the freedom of their country.

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