



QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT AND THE UNSUNG WOMEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DHEKIAJULI MARTYRS

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Abstract: On 8th August 1942, the All-India National Congress took the resolution for demanding the colonial authority to quit India. But the colonial government arrested all the top-level leaders of Congress. Assam, an integral part of North East India, witnessed the same situation. Here also all the responsibilities were fell in the hands of the volunteers. The Quit India movement was one of the popular and powerful mass movements in the series of agitations led by Mahatma Gandhi in the course of the freedom struggle. The inhabitants of Assam specially the women jumped into the vortex of struggle with the determination to 'do or die 'in a way that would make every freedom-loving people proud. In Assam the quit India movement took place at Kamrup, Nowgong, Shivsagar, Golaghat, Goalpara, Dhekiajuli, and in various other areas. Assam witnessed an unmatched game of tears and blood during the 1942 quit India movement. The freedom movement of India was not confined to a particular region or to a particular gender, instead, it had spread throughout the country equally. The contribution of freedom fighters of Dhekiajuli in the district of Sonitpur in Assam in the freedom struggle of 1942 was worth mentioning. The women freedom fighters fought bravely with the Britishers for the independence of the country and sacrificed their lives for the motherland. Dhekiajuli, in fact, was the worst scene of police brutality during the quit India phase of the freedom movement in 1942. Several Assamese women, who were members of the Mrityubahini or Santi Sena were the backbone of the movement. This paper aims to pay tribute to those unsung women freedom fighters who deserve recognition but missed the light.

Keyword: Quit India movement, women freedom fighters, Mrityubahini, Santi Sena, Dhekiajuli martyr

I. INTRODUCTION

The Quit India Movement was the most significant freedom movement in India after the revolt of 1857. This movement was widespread all over the country including the state Assam, an important state of north east India. The middle-class people participated into the movement spontaneously and people from many urban and rural places of entire state, especially the young people and women were mobilized into this movement and they had faced all the savage torture enforced by the colonial government and many sacrificed their lives for the independence of the country. Women also participated actively in this movement. Large numbers of women got involved and campaigned the programmes of the movement. They developed women's wing and became members of the Santi Sena. Mrityu Bahini (Suicide Squad) was formed and Violence and sabotage activities were carried out by the women force. Women took part in every sphere of the struggle for independence throughout the oppressive era. They participated in Gandhi's programmes like the processions, picketing, hunger strikes and other activities called for. However, there isn't much written about them. The moment has come to honour the unsung heroes whose achievements will not go unnoticed.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the paper is to deal with the unsung women freedom fighters of the freedom struggle 'Quit India Movement' in Assam against the British. The study will draw the special attention to the martyrs of Dekiajuli district of Assam.

III. METHODOLOGY

The analytical method is used in the study. The paper is based on secondary sources available books, journals, newspapers, research papers, the internet and websites.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

To study the role of women freedom fighters in quit India movement in Assam the researchers had gone through some research papers.

In the piece titled "Unsung Heroes of the Freedom Movement from Assam," Pompi Boruah (2022) identified and named a few freedom fighters. She talked about Bidyawati Gogoi, Chakradhar Bhuyan, Bipin Pal Das, Sonaram Chutia, Debeswar Doloi, Bholanath Baruah and told that individuals from many regions united to save their motherland. Sagar Boruah (2001) in his paper "Non-Cooperation Movement and Peasants of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam," studied the role played by Assam's peasants in the resistance movement against the British. The peasants opposed the levying of taxes and stamp charges. Assamese people including the women made a significant contribution to the Indian freedom movement, providing enough evidence of their desire for freedom. Some of the wellknown leaders who inspired people to participate in the freedom fight actively included Tarunram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Kulandhar Chaliha, Krishanth Sarmah, Haladhar Bhuyan, and Kanak Chandra Sarmah. Puzari and Mazne(2001), in their paper "Role of Assamese Women in the Liberation Struggle of India" described elaborately the sacrifice, participation and contribution of women in Assam in freedom struggle. Assam joined the mainstream freedom movement in 1921, and Gandhiji's visit to Assam the same year strengthened the people of Assam. They gave stress on the fact that how women actively participated in India's independence movement and freedom struggle. Women took an active part in picketing in front of stores selling alcohol, opium, and imported products. Assam's Mukti Sangha, Assam Chatra Sanmilan, Assam Sahitya Sabha, and Assam Mahila Samiti etc. were some organisations that contributed significantly to the Indian independence movement. The contribution of women to India's freedom struggle was studied by Nath (2020) in "Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India: A Gender Perspective." Women's social and political advancement was established by their active participation in political affairs.

V. BACKGROUND OF QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

Quit India movement was the struggle for freedom of our motherland initiated by Gandhiji and ignited by his slogan 'Do or Die'. In 1939 second world war broke out and tension in the British camp increased when Japan took part into the war at the end of 1941. The Japanese soldiers advanced through South-east Asia and put an imminent Japanese invasion. In this global situation China and the United States made pressure on Britain to get support and benefits from India granting her demands for an immediate move towards independence. The British government sent Sir Stafford Cripps to India for taking steps to give India a dominion status by framing a constitution for a new Indian union. India was not satisfied with such type of proposals. They believed for total independence. Gandhiji thought that it was the time to enforce British for leaving India completely. The idea had been gradually directed into the Quit India movement. In the meeting of congress working committee at Wardha on 14th July 1942, discussed Gandhiji's idea had been discussed and they agreed for a mass movement in the country to uproot the British Power from Indian soil. The resolution taken to this effect was notified in the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) session held in Bombay on 7-8 August 1942. After the adoption of the Quit India resolution, the congress organizations both at the provincial and district levels were asked to jump up for the movement and to develop volunteers at large numbers Boycott, picketing and hunger strikes, opposition of law, anti-war propaganda, general strikes, formation of a parallel government etc. were cited as probable agenda for the future course of action. Though the revolt of 1942 failed, but it achieved two things. This movement had given enunciation to India's outrage against imperialism and determination for independence.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

On the basis of analysis of secondary data, the researchers have found that women of Assam contributed a lot in the Quit India Movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Nation.

Role of Woman in Assam During Quit India movement:

The womenfolk were nowhere even a step behind the men in fighting for the country's independence. They participated spontaneously and wholeheartedly in the struggle without any fear in their mind. Many of them embraced martyrdom for the love of the nation, while other were attacked by lathi charge and injured in police firing. Women of Assam joined the quit India movement in large numbers for freedom. Many Satyagrahi training centers for the women were opened in different places of Assam. There were two types of programs in quit India movement. One section of the population believed in boycotting, meeting, processions hunger strike etc. but another section of population considered that the meetings and processions had no results and fruitfulness. They believed in underground activities like cutting telegraph and telephone lines, destroying bridges and railway lines and giving fire on government buildings. The freedom fighters who had selected these sabotaging paths had to bear lots of pain and untold miseries. Many more time they had to move a long path without food, water and sleep, always there was a risk to survive. The women of Assam accepted Gandhiji's idea of quit India movement in their own way and got involved in all types of activities during the Quit India movement. In order to keep peace and maintain law in the rural areas, an organization was established in Darrang district named as Santi sena. The underground leaders formed an organization in 1942 named Mrityu Bahini (Death Squad) in order to conduct revolutionary activities systematically. The village panchayat was participating vigorously in some places and some of them even tried to form parallel government. They hold big meetings and processions, attempted to unfurl the congress flag on police stations, court buildings and other common buildings. People destroyed government properties and buildings at various places. Even attempts were also made to capture the police stations at Sootea and Behali. Among these people most of them were the members of Santi sena. Many women also took part in this movement as the male leaders were imprisoned.

Swarna prova Mahanta led an organization named Mohila Mrityu Bahini which was comprised of 350 girls and women who took part in this movement. Some of the important women participants were like-Labanya Devi, Ganeswari Bhuyan, Premoda Bormudoi, Padumilata Barua, Basumati Koch, Dineswari Hazarika, Kooseswari Devi, Purnada Devi, Padmini Barua, Padumi Gogoi Barua and so on. Chandraprova Saikiani, Puspalata Das, Amalprova Das were the prominent leaders of the women wing. Kanaklata, Buddheswari Hazarika, Ratnabala Phukan, Damayanti Bora, and Khahuli Nath were active members of the Mrityu Bahini. 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. The plan was taken under the leadership of Pushpalata Das to hoist the national flag on 20th September, 1942 in Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Bihali and Sootea. Men and women from nearby villages came out in processions and proceeded for flag hoisting. The police fired on the peaceful processions at Gohpur and Dhekiajuli. Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Devi and Kamuli Devi were shot dead on the spot and many others were poorly injured.

Kanaklata Barua, an eighteen-year-old girl was died at Gohpur by the bullets of police while she was leading 5000 people from Chaiduar to hoist the flag in the local police station. A daring women volunteer named Tileswari Mahanta successfully hoisted the national flag at Bihali police station. Not only in Darrang district but in some other places like North Lakhimpur, Jorhat etc. attempts were taken to hoist the national flag on government buildings. On 15th October 1942, eighty women from the villages near Teok attempted to attack the police station without any leader of importance but it was in vain. Patacharkuchi police station was attacked by the women of Borpetta district and they physically hit the police officer as counter attack of the police firing. Most of the Assamese women generally followed on Gandhian non-violent line, but some of them participated in extremist activities. In the Sibsagar district, Aikan Bhuyan of Mudoijan near Teok led in setting fire to the Amguri High School. She made many secret meetings to motivate congress youths to damage government properties. During the destruction process she often gave the patrolling duty. Top secret messages were sent from one place to another by the hands of Sudhalata Dutta and Reboti Lahon, who often walked long distances on foot to carry out their duty. Educated girls belonging to the secret groups were used in transmitting secret circulars and bulletins In Nowgong district, with the cooperation of Jaymati Saikia the revolutionary group burnt the Bebejia road bridge on 25 / 26 August 1942. Girls like Pitrani Saikia and Dagati Bora of Nowgong district worked for the security of the underground male workers. Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi, wives of Brajnath Sarma, helped their husband and his underground party workers giving food and shelter to carry their revolutionary activities Ratnabala Phukan allowed her house to be used as a center of underground activities. Budheswari Hazarika helped in sinking cargo boats carrying military

supplies through the Brahmaputra River. During the year 1942, the police were given unlimited power to control the movement. The sufferings of the women of Assam during this period was miserable. Beating, slapping, kicking, insulting with the use of nasty, obscene language, entering the house during night hours without any permission and vigorously misbehaving, raping with the womenfolk etc. were the common methods applied the police and military for the suppression of the womenfolk.

Some Unsung Women freedom fighters of Assam in Quit India Movement:

A few freedom fighters who remained unsung by historians and academicians are described here.

Kanaklata Barua, Gohpur

Kanaklata Barua is affectionately referred to as Birbala and Shaheed. She was born in the Assamese village of Borangabari in the Darrang district. Her mother's name is Karneshwari Barua, and her father is Krishna Kanta. When Kanaklata was still a young child, her mother passed away. During the Quit India movement, she joined the Mrityu Bahini, a killing squad made up of young Assamese from the Gohpur district. The 69 Bahini gang consented to hoist the flag at the neighbourhood police station on September 20, 1942. An active organiser and member of Mrityu Bahini, Kanaklata was shot dead by the British police on September 20, 1942 while she was leading a procession holding the national flag during the Quit India Movement and then she was just nearly 18.

Bhogeswari Phukanani, Nagaon

An active organiser of the freedom movement in Nagaon struggled a lot for independence. On September 18, 1942, she was shot by the British while marching forward with the national flag at Barhampur. She died three days later after the incidence.

Rebati Lahon, Teok

She was an active participant and organiser of the Quit India Movement. She was sent jail in 1942. During imprisonment, she suffered from pneumonia due to the poor unhealthy living condition in jail. She died soon after coming out of imprisonment

Lila Neogoni, Lakhimpur

She was actively involved in the 1942 revolt. She was severely beaten by the police at Lakhimpur in 1942 while participating in a procession against them. She succumbed to her injuries after two months.

A special tribute to Dhekiajuli Martyrs:

On September 20, 1942, as part of the Quit India movement, processions of freedom fighters marched to various police stations across several towns in Assam. These squads, which were known as 'MrityuBahini', or death squads, had wide participation — including women and children — and set out to unfurl the tricolour atop police stations, seen as symbols of colonial power. The British administration brutally resisted the movement in Dhekiajuli. At least 15 people were shot dead, three of them women, including the 12-year-old Tileswari Barua. Many women were severely injured by lathicharge, beating, kicking etc. and succumbed to death. Numerous brave women who actively participated in the Quit India Movement were put to death. Dhekiajuli town in Sonitpur district observes September 20 as Martyrs' Day as remembrance of those freedom fighters.

Some of these braveheart women, who fought for independence and eventually sacrificed their lives of Dhekiajuli are listed below:

Tileswari Barua

She was an active participant in the Quit India Movement from Dhekiajuli. On September 20, 1920, she was shot dead in police firing while trying to hoist the national flag at Dhekiajuli. Tileswari Barua was born in Niz Bargaon, a small village in the Dhekiajuli police station, where her mother, Bhabakanta Barua, was a subsistence farmer. Tileswari was greatly influenced by the songs written by Jyotiprasad Agarwal on 'satyagrahis' and voluntarily participated in the procession that was set up to hoist the tricolour over the Dhekiajuli. At the age of 12, Tileswari was shot and slain as she marched with a flag toward the police station.

Khahuli Devi

She was shot dead in Dehekiajuli police firing on September 20, 1942. She was pregnant at that time.

Kumali Devi

She was another braveheart who was killed at the Dhekiajuli police firing along with Tileswari Baruah and Khahuli Devi on September 20, 1942.

Padumi Gogoi

She was an active participant in the Quit India Movement from Dhekiajuli. She was severely wounded in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on September 20, 1942. She was arrested and sent jail for six months. When she was released her health condition was worst and so she died soon.

Golapi Chutiani

She was involved actively in the 1942 movement in Dhekiajuli. The revolt was blocked by police. They made firing and lathicharge on the volunteers during their procession. She was wounded acutely in the lathi attack and later gave away to her injuries.

Thunuki Das

She was another fearless active participant in the 1942 revolt at Dhekiajuli. She was hurt severely in the lathicharge action that happened near Dhekiajuli police station to stop the revolutionaries on September 20, 1942, and died a few days later.

Jaluki Kachariani

Another active participant of 1942 revolt, injured by bullet in the Dhekiajuli police firing on September 20, 1942, and died soon after.

Kon Chutiani

She was also got injury in the lathi attack near Dhekiajuli police station on September 20, 1942, and after a few days she also succumbed to her wound.

Many women of Assam had sacrificed their lives and families during the Quit India movement for independence of the country. Some of them were in forefront and some of them were behind the screen with a wish and hope to get independence. Being inspired by the celebration of “Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav”, an event launched by Government of India for the observance of 75th anniversary of Indian independence, the researchers have tried to pay tribute to some of them who had become unnoticed and unsung.

VII. CONCLUSION

The women of Assam actively participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India Movement by processions, picketing, boycotting imported goods, hunger strikes, forming alternate government etc. We should pay honour and respect for every freedom fighter, irrespective of their caste, creed and gender, because it was, they who won our freedom. The womenfolk, who generally surrounded by various constrains, had tried their best in Assam to get independence from British rulers but in many cases missed the light. We have to be grateful for what they gave up. Even now, they continue to inspire people. It is the time to remember, know and follow the path of those courageous women who in spite of many social barriers fought for freedom especially in quit India movement in Assam by arising patriotism in our mind and showing the path to live in harmony and peace with one another for the development of India.

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