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Reflection of Young Martyr Kanaklata Barua and the Dependability of Assamese Women in India's Freedom Movement

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Abstract

A teenage girl, who turned freedom fighter jumped into India's Independence Movement against British, sacrificed her life during the Quit India Movement of 1942 and became a martyr at just 17 is none other than Kanaklata Barua. She was the daughter of Krishna Kanta Barua and Karneshwari Barua of Barangabari of Darrang District of Assam on 22nd December, 1926. She was Granddaughter of Ghana Kanta Barua. Ghana Kanta Barua was known for his hunting skills and thus was popular as Gahana Chikari or Ghana the Hunter. Kanaklata Barua lost her mother and father when she was 5 and 13 respectively. She was compelled to leave school from third standard as she had to take care of her younger siblings. The ancestors of Kanaklata Barua belong to the kingdom of Dolakharia Barua of the former state of Ahom and they gave up the title of Dolakharia and retained the title 'Barua'. Kanaklata Barua became the first martyr of 1942 revolution. She is referred as 'Shaheed' or 'martyr' and 'Birbala' as she had been hardheartedly shot dead by police firing.

Keywords: Disobedience Movement, Struggle For freedom, Women, Role, Martyrdom

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The Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement (*Bharat Chhodo Andolan*) or the *August Movement* was a Civil Disobedience Movement in India. On 8th August 1942, the Quit India resolution was passed at the Bombay session of the All India Congress Committee in reply to Gandhi's call for immediate independence of India and in opposition to sending Indians to World War II. According to the draft's proposal, if the British did not consent to the demands, a massive Civil Disobedience would be launched. Gandhiji asked the teachers to leave their schools and others to leave their respective jobs and contribute in the movement and accordingly a massive percentage of the Indian population joined the Movement.

The people of Assam made outstanding contributions in every phase of the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam in 1921, which boosted the freedom movement and gained momentum in the state.

Kanaklata Barua as a Freedom Fighter

Kanaklata Barua was in Tezpur, when the Non Cooperation Movement was at its pinnacle in 1942. She jumped into the Quit India Movement of 1942. A gigantic camp for revolutionaries was set up there. She had associated herself with a group termed as 'Mrityu Bahini' which involved youth members of the subdivision of Gohpur, Assam, during the Quit India Movement.

On 20th September, 1942, the Mrityu Bahini faction decided to hoist the national flag at the local police station. Numerous unarmed youngsters and villagers enthused by Kanaklata Barua marching towards the Gohpur police station with the aim to hoist the Indian tricolour at the station. The police officer-in-charge, Rebati Mahan Som of the police station warned the procession of terrible consequences if they went ahead with their plan of planting the national flag at the predetermined venue. However, the procession continued marching ahead armed with bravery as their only weapon despite repeated warnings by the officer-in-charge and resistance from the police force. And suddenly the policemen open fired at unarmed people.

Kanaklata Barua succumbed to death from bullets fired by the policemen while holding Indian tricolor flag high in air, at the age of just 17. Then a villager named Mukunda Kakoti hold the flag of Kanaklata and he was also shot dead. Both Kanaklata Barua and Mukunda Kakoti were killed in the police action.

Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India

Gandhiji attracted a large number of men and women of the entire nation to the national struggle for freedom. Gandhiji's visit to Assam in 1921 instrumentally inspired on the people of the state. His good impression of the women of Assam boosted the self confidence and strength of mind of the women.

The Assamese women participated actively in the movement through the Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Student Association) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary

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Society) till the development of the Assam Mahila Samiti (Assam Women Association) in 1926. A huge number of women participated in meetings and involved in organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices as well.

A few women basically from the urban areas and who were belong to the families of congress leaders and workers came forward to engage in organizational and publicity work among the other women of rural areas. Some of them were Hemanta Kumari Devi Bordoloi, poetess Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Rajabala Das, etc.

One of the major constructive programme of Non-Cooperation Movement was promoting spinning and weaving. The achievement of the Assamese women was noteworthy in this aspect. The women of Assam were resourceful in the department of spinning and weaving due to the large scale production of the “khadi” by the women. Thus the boycott of foreign clothes was highly successful in the state.

Gandhiji complimented Assamese women– “.... Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves.” He appealed to boycott foreign goods in a meeting held on 18th August 1921 in Guwahati. The women boycotted their foreign clothes which they considered as precious. The women of Assam also participated in the prohibition of opium and liquor by picketing before the opium and liquor shops.

One, Dariki Dasi Baruah, an anti-opium worker of Golaghat was arrested on 1st February, 1932 for taking active part in anti-opium picketing programme. She was imprisoned for six months who was in her preliminary stage of pregnancy at that time. The authorities of the Sibsagar jail advised her to appeal for a conditional release. However, she refused to obey with the advice and breathed her last in the jail due to dysentery. This is one of the examples of Assamese patriotic woman who were strongly determined.

The women of the state are known for their contributed both in the form of cash and kind. The contribution to the Tilak Swaraj Fund was another example of the contribution of Assamese women in the freedom movement of the country. Twelve ladies from the Sibsagar town donated all their precious ornaments to the fund. One, Bhanumati Talukdar left her husband and children to work exclusively for the congress. Gandhiji nicknamed her as the ‘Sorojini’ of Assam. Again one, Chandraprova Saikiani of Darrang, quit their jobs to participate in the movement.

Assamese women participated in fund collection for the congress and in campaign against social evils like untouchability. They also contributed in process popularization of Hindi as the national language of the nation. Some girl students of Assam decided to start a revolutionary organization called the ‘Mukti Sangha’ in the premises of Kamrup Mahila Samity (Women Association) in 1930. The girls pledged to fight for the liberation of the country from foreign rule and signed it with their blood.

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In 1929, the historic Lahore Congress Session under the presidentship of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru decided to adopt the resolution for independence. So, it was decided to celebrate the 26th January 1930 as the first Independence Day of India in the entire the country. So, women of Kaliabor decided to join the celebration in the district head quarter town, Nowgong and accordingly a group of women proceeded towards Nowgong under the leadership of Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain and Kiranbala Bora. The women of the wayside villages also joined the procession.

Gandhiji again visited Assam in April, 1934 and attended many public meetings organized by the women in different places of Assam to erase untouchability. One, Giribala Devi an orthodox Brahmin lady opened their private family temple to the Harijans in the presence of Gandhiji in Jorhat. Another woman from Jorhat, Swarnalata Devi, known for her devotion to the work of Harijan welfare.

Basically, most of the Assamese women participated in the movement on Gandhian non-violent concept. However, some of them were disappointed with the Gandhian methods and themselves involved in underground and extremist activities. On 15th October 1942, a group of women from the villages near Teok made an unsuccessful attempt to attack the police station. The women from Barpeta District attacked on the Patacharkuchi Police Station and assaulted the police officer in revenge to the police firing.

One, Aikan Bhuyan of Mudoijan leaded in setting fire to the Amguri High School in Sibsagar District. She was involved in conducting secret meetings to instigate youths to damage government properties. The local congress assigned the task of communicating secret messages from one place to another to Sudhalata Dutta and Reboti Lahon. They had to cross long distances on foot for the duty assigned to them. Once, Sudhalata Dutta covered a distance of 142 kilometer on foot with a child on her lap.

One, Jaymati Saikia cooperated with the revolutionary group to burn up the Bebejia road bridge in Nowgong District. Pitrani Saikia and Dagati Bora worked for the safety of the underground male workers. Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi facilitate their husband and underground party workers to continue their disrupt activities by providing them food and shelter. Budheswari Hazarika played a vital role in dipping cargo boats which carried military supplies through River Brahmaputra.

In 1942 complete Police Raj was instituted in the state which enhanced the police with unlimited power of oppression to control the movement. The women had to suffer all the miseries in the world. They had to face beating, slapping, kicking. Police insulted using of filthy languages, forcefully entered the houses at night hours and misbehaved with the women. The women of the Brahmaputra Valley were victims of such terrible police rages, which included mass raping and molestations. The girls at the age of puberty were deflowered.

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The women had to suffer both physical and mental torture in numerous ways. This led the participation of Assamese women in the Freedom Movement in greater number in the subsequent years of the movement. It was only for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were afraid of was not Gandhiji but the countless illiterate women of India who became the ambassador of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could hold back such a development. Thus, the contribution of women especially Assamese women in the struggle for freedom of India cannot be encompassed in such a small article.

Some Photographs



The author (Guptajit Pathak) in front of the statue of martyr Kanaklata Barua and Mukunda Kakati, near Gohpur Police Station.



Kalicharan Barua, youngest brother of Martyr Kanaklata Barua, Barangabari stands in front of the statue of Martyr (Shahid) Kanaklata Barua.

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