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Volume: 8, Issue 1, 2021 (Jan-Mar)

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW, EDUCATION, SOCIAL AND SPORTS STUDIES (IJLESS)

A Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

DOI: 10.33329/ijless

<http://ijless.kypublications.com/>

ISSN: 2455-0418 (Print), 2394-9724 (online)

2020©KY PUBLICATIONS, INDIA

www.kypublications.com

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Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India

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DOI: [10.33329/ijless.8.1.106](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijless.8.1.106)



ABSTRACT

The role of Assamese women in India's freedom struggle was significant and multifaceted, despite facing societal and colonial constraints. From the early 20th century leading up to independence in 1947, Assamese women emerged as nationalists, activists, revolutionaries, and social reformers. They contributed vigorously to major movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Salt Satyagraha, and Quit India Movement. Prominent figures like Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani, and Chandraprabha Saikiani are emblematic of the courage and sacrifice that characterized their participation. These women challenged both British colonial authority and prevailing gender norms, thereby paving the way for women's empowerment in the region. Utilizing archival records, oral histories, and primary sources, this study explores the strategies, struggles, and sacrifices of Assamese women, emphasizing their lasting legacy in India's independence narrative and gender equality movements.

Keywords: Assamese women, Indian freedom struggle, Nationalism, Kanaklata Barua, Women's empowerment.

Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle was a monumental movement characterized by the participation of diverse groups from various regions of the country. Among these were the women of Assam, who played a critical yet often under acknowledged role in shaping the nationalist discourse and resistance against British colonialism. The participation of Assamese women in the freedom struggle is significant not only because it reflects the broader involvement of Indian women but also because it highlights the unique socio-cultural and political fabric of Assam during the early to mid-20th century.

Assam, located in the northeastern part of India, had a distinctive colonial experience due to its geographical isolation, tribal diversity, and strategic importance. The freedom movement in Assam was infused with regional aspirations alongside the larger Indian nationalist agenda. Women from this region emerged as pioneers in challenging colonial oppression and social discrimination, mobilizing both urban and rural communities. Their involvement ranged from participating in mass agitations, boycotting foreign goods, and spreading nationalist ideas, to making tremendous sacrifices, including imprisonment and martyrdom.

Initially, the participation of women in Assam mirrored the national trend, where women's involvement in political movements was limited due to traditional and patriarchal societal norms. However, the visit of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Assam in the early 1920s was a turning point. Gandhi's ideology, which emphasized non-violent civil disobedience and the constructive role of women, inspired Assamese women to step into the political arena more assertively. The Assam Provincial Congress Committee's formation further institutionalized women's participation in the freedom struggle, fostering organizational structures that encouraged women's leadership and activism.

The socio-cultural landscape of Assam was marked by certain progressive elements that facilitated women's roles in the nationalist movement. Prominent social reformers such as Chandraprabha Saikiani advocated for women's education and gender equality, which helped nurture a generation of women capable of taking active roles in political and social reform. Women's groups and associations became instrumental in localizing the nationalist movement, linking it to everyday issues such as education, social reform, and cultural preservation. These organizations worked alongside male leaders to form a joint front against British imperialism.

Throughout the major phases of the Indian independence movement—the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), and Quit India Movement (1942-44)—Assamese women were actively involved. For example, Kanaklata Barua from Barpeta became a symbol of ultimate sacrifice when she was shot during a peaceful protest against British authority. Bhogeswari Phukanani, another prominent figure, led protests that displayed formidable courage and leadership, inspiring many others to join the nationalist cause. These women defied prevailing gender norms and confronted colonial repression with resilience and determination.

Moreover, Assamese women's participation was not confined to peaceful protests alone. Several women were engaged in revolutionary activities that included sabotage, communication, and support for armed resistance groups. They also partook in constructive programs promoted by Gandhi, such as the spinning of khadi, promoting swadeshi goods, and efforts aimed at the removal of social evils like untouchability. The dual role of Assamese women as both activists and reformers underlined their importance in the larger framework of the independence movement.

In addition to direct political action, women in Assam contributed significantly to the cultural and intellectual aspects of the freedom struggle. They worked to preserve Assamese language and heritage, which were seen as essential to nationalist identity. Through literary contributions, speeches, and organizing cultural events, women helped weave the nationalist narrative into the everyday lives of the Assamese people. Their cultural activism complemented their political efforts by fostering a sense of pride and unity among the masses.

The challenges faced by Assamese women were immense. They had to navigate a patriarchal society that often resisted their public roles, harsh repression by colonial authorities, and the hardships of imprisonment and social ostracism. Despite these obstacles, their commitment to the nationalist cause remained unwavering, and their sacrifices have been memorialized as an integral part of Assam's and India's history.

This study delves into archival records, oral histories, and scholarly research to present a comprehensive narrative about Assamese women's role in the freedom struggle. By highlighting individual and collective efforts, the study intends to foreground the contributions that have long been marginalized in mainstream historical accounts. In doing so, it reaffirms the significance of Assamese women as formidable agents of political and social change.

Objective of the Study

- To investigate the contributions of Assamese women in different phases of the Indian freedom movement.
- To highlight the roles of key female figures from Assam.
- To examine the socio-political impact of women's participation on Assam and the wider nationalist movement.
- To explore the challenges, strategies, and sacrifices involved in their activism.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research using historical and archival sources, including letters, government records, newspapers, and oral narratives. Secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and research papers provide additional context. The research employs a narrative approach focusing on biographical studies of prominent women and grassroots movements in Assam.

Literary Review

Scholarly works on Assamese women's roles in the Indian freedom struggle emphasize their multifaceted contributions as nationalists, revolutionaries, and social reformers across major movements like Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India.

Studies highlight key figures such as Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani, and Chandraprabha Saikiani, who led protests, faced martyrdom, and challenged both colonial rule and patriarchal norms.

Early research focuses on regional participation in Assam's Brahmaputra Valley, documenting women's mobilization in grassroots campaigns, khadi promotion, and anti-imperialist activities from the 1920s onward.

Pathak's book provides a detailed biographical analysis of Kanaklata Barua within the broader independence context, underscoring her symbolic martyrdom during Quit India.

- Borah's article examines archival records and oral histories to trace women's strategies and sacrifices, positioning them as cultural preservationists who linked regional identity to national resistance.
- Analyses of Quit India reveal Assamese women breaking societal boundaries, leading non-violent and revolutionary actions, as depicted in literary works like Bhattacharyya's *Mrityunjay*.
- Historical studies note their surpassing courage compared to women elsewhere, including sabotage and organizational roles amid British repression.
- Recent scholarship critiques mainstream historiography for marginalizing women's voices, advocating feminist lenses on movements like Assam's freedom struggle where female demands were often overlooked despite heavy reliance on their participation.

Discussion

Socio-Political Context in Assam (1920s Onward): Assam during the early 20th century faced unique colonial pressures including tea plantation exploitation and administrative isolation, fostering regional resentment that women channeled into nationalist activities. Traditional Assamese society confined women to domestic roles, yet reformers like Chandraprabha Saikiani promoted education and public engagement, laying groundwork for political activism. Gandhi's 1921 visit to Assam galvanized

women, boosting their confidence through his emphasis on non-violence and swadeshi, leading to increased participation in provincial Congress committees.

Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922): Assamese women organized prabhat pheris, boycotted foreign cloth, and picketed liquor shops, facing lathi charges despite initial hesitance. Leaders like Saikiani formed women's wings in Golaghat, mobilizing rural areas and marking their shift from observers to active participants. Their efforts complemented male-led protests, amplifying the movement's reach in Brahmaputra Valley districts like Nowgong and Sibsagar

- Key actions included mass meetings and khadi spinning campaigns, which linked economic self-reliance to anti-colonial resistance.
- Women endured arrests, with figures like Muktabala Baishnabi among the first imprisoned, inspiring broader involvement.

Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934): Women led flag hoisting processions on January 26, 1930, in Nowgong under Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Mohini Gohain, and Kiranbala Bora, defying police brutality. Saikiani's arrests alongside Guneswari Devi and others fueled momentum, spreading satyagraha to remote villages. They promoted Hindi as a national language and combated untouchability, aligning with Gandhi's constructive program while challenging local social hierarchies.

Participation peaked in picketing and processions, with women surpassing men in some districts due to their organizational zeal. British records noted their role in paralyzing administration through sustained non-violent defiance.

Quit India Movement (1942-1944): Assamese women epitomized "do or die," replacing British insignia with tricolors in Darrang and leading sabotage like cutting telegraph lines. Kanaklata Barua, aged 17, marched with a flag in Gohpur, shot dead by police on September 20, 1942, becoming a martyr symbolizing youth sacrifice. Bhogeswari Phukanani organized anti-imperialist days in Barpeta, courting arrests and embodying revolutionary spirit.

- Revolutionary women aided males in burning government buildings and damaging bridges, blending Gandhian and militant tactics.
- In Sibsagar, Kamalabala Kakati's imprisonment highlighted widespread female defiance amid mass repression.

Key Figures and Their Contributions

Kanaklata Barua: Led Mrityu Bahini in 1942, her death galvanized Assam's youth; commemorated in literature like Bhattacharyya's Mrityunjay.

Bhogeswari Phukanani: Initiated Pathsala protests in 1943, faced police firing; her leadership bridged non-violence and militancy.

Chandraprabha Saikiani: Founded All Assam Pratirakshya Samiti, first Assamese woman arrested in 1930; advocated women's rights alongside nationalism.

- Others like Guneswari Devi pioneered imprisonments; Dariki Kachari and Mohini Gohain endured beatings in processions.
- Tribal women from fringes joined, expanding movement inclusivity.

Challenges and Repression Faced

Women confronted patriarchal backlash, colonial lathi charges, and imprisonments in harsh conditions, yet their resilience amplified nationalist fervor. British tactics targeted female protesters to

demoralize communities, but martyrdoms like Barua's backfired, spurring more joins. Social ostracism post-arrest compounded risks, yet they prioritized swaraj over personal safety.

Constructive Programs and Social Reforms

Beyond protests, women spun khadi, removed untouchability (minimal in Assam but addressed), and preserved cultural identity through literature and events. Saikiani's organizations linked swadeshi to education drives, empowering rural women economically. These efforts sustained movement during lulls, fostering long-term societal change.

Revolutionary vs. Non-Violent Streams

While most followed Gandhi, revolutionary women supported sabotage, contrasting national trends and highlighting Assam's dual resistance strands. This duality showcased strategic adaptability amid repression.

Cultural and Intellectual Impact

Women preserved Assamese heritage via songs, writings, and festivals, intertwining regional pride with pan-Indian nationalism. Their narratives in oral histories and memoirs reinforced collective memory.

Long-Term Legacy

Assamese women's activism elevated gender roles post-1947, influencing education and politics; gaps remain in tribal contributions needing further study.

Findings

- Assamese women played crucial roles in mobilizing local communities against British colonial rule.
- Key figures such as Kanaklata Barua became martyrs and symbols of the freedom struggle in Assam.
- Assamese women's organizations were pivotal in organizing protests and raising nationalist sentiment.
- Participation in national movements challenged traditional gender roles and enhanced women's status in society.
- Women activists faced repression and violence but remained resilient and committed.
- The legacy of these women helped lay the foundation for post-independence women's empowerment in Assam.

Conclusion

The contribution of Assamese women in India's freedom struggle is a testimony to their courage, patriotism, and determination to secure independence. Through active participation in mass movements and social reforms, they not only resisted colonial rule but also contributed to redefining women's roles in Assamese society. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations in Assam and across India.

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