

## **Role of Assamese Woman in the Quit India Movement: A Study with Special References to Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's Mrityunjay**

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### **Abstract:**

The history of Indian freedom struggle would not be complete without mentioning the contribution of women. The sacrifice made by the Indian women occupy foremost place. They showed their courage and fought against the British with true spirit. 'Quit India movement' which was took place in 1942, was a remarkable movement of Indian freedom struggle; women's participation in this movement became more visible. During the Quit India movement, women's participation was not confined only Gandhian non-violent activities but some of them also took part in various revolutionary activities. Like the other part of the India in Assam, women's role in this movement is notable; women like Kanaklata Barua, Nalini Bala Devi, Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi etc. took part in this movement. Jnanpith award winning novel of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's 'Mrityunjay' reflect a very clear picture of the Assamese women's participation in Quit India Movement. In this paper an attempt has made to discuss the role of women in Quit India movement with special reference to Assam and the scenario as reflected in the great work of Bhattacharyya's 'Mrityunjay'.

**Keywords:** Mrityunjay, Assamese Women, Quit India Movement, Freedom Struggle

## **1. Introduction:**

The participation of women in different social activities has always been the topic of discussion. The position of females in a patriarchal society is often considered as marginalized and their voices and performances were being subalternized. The performance of females was curtailed within the household activities and taking care of the family and children. The public appearances of females were almost none. Their abilities were often ignored.

The fight for the position and recognition of the voice in the public appearances is there since the beginning of the feminist movement. In this context the importance of the Indian freedom struggle lies. The long period of struggle for freedom where countless leaders sacrificed their lives, many of them were imprisoned. The society reached to the extent where almost all the males were inside lockup. In such a crucial time frame the females took the leading role, they kept aside their personal emotions, lost and came out of their boundaries to participate in the freedom struggles. Through this paper an attempt is being made upon the role and position of females in the freedom struggle and how this helps in breaking the patriarchal notion of the society and invading a new path for the females in the society. While discussing the position of female in the Indian freedom struggle especially Quit India movement, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Mrityunjay* is taken as a primary text.

## **2. Objectives:**

The main objectives of the paper are as given below-

- i) The participation of Assamese women in Quit India movement.
- ii) Impact of Quit India movement in breaking the marginalized position of females in Assamese society.
- iii) Exploring the other influential factors apart from the conventional influence of Quit India movement.

## **3. Methodology:**

In the process of preparing this paper the descriptive and analytical and historical methods are being used. The primary context for the study is the Quit India movement in Assam and how Assamese women participated in the movement. In this regard Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Mrityunjay* is taken as the literary text to evaluate the mentioned objectives.

## **4. Discussion:**

### **4.1. Background of the Quit India Movement and women's Role**

The Quit India Movement which was also known as *Bharat Chhodo Andolan*, was one of the remarkable freedom movement lunched by Mahatma Gandhi. A large number of masses irrespective of gender, class, caste and religion participated in this movement. The movement

was formally launched on August 8, 1942 at the Bombay session of the Indian Congress Committee. There are some inherent causes which led the outbreak this movement.

The Second World War started in 1939. Japan joined the war on the side of Germany and Italy on December 7, 1941 with a surprised attack on America fleet at Pearl Harbor. Then Japan quickly occupied the South Asian countries like Philippines, Indonesia, Burma etc. The invasion of Rangoon in March 1945, created a fear among masses of India. Indians were on the view that Japanese would attack on India because of the presence of British. In such circumstances the Indian National Congress decided to give full cooperation to British in the Second World War if the British Government transferred the substance of power to India and promised to give complete independence after the war. At that time British needed Indian support and cooperation in the war. To gained the security and cooperation, the British Government sent Cripps Mission in March 1942 headed by Stafford Cripps, along with Lord Privy and other member from the State council including the leader of the House of Commons.

The mission declared that the main aim was “the earliest possible realisation of self-government in India.”<sup>i</sup> But the discussion between Cripps and Congress leaders failed. The British Government did not accept Congress’ demand for the transfer of effective power and the Indian leaders also don’t have any faith over the promises of the British, that they gave full independence to India as in the present all the important power is on the Viceroy’s hand. In such circumstances they were determined to cooperate in the Second World War but without forming a national government they did not want to take part in the war.

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, the political situation of the country becomes more intolerable. The Congress leaders then decided to take effective efforts to compel the British to accept the demands of Independence. On 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1942 the All Indian Congress Committee met at Bombay and they passed the famous “Quit India Resolution”. This meeting took the decision to start the movement in non-violent Gandhian way under the guideship of

M. K. Gandhi. The resolution declared: “...The ending of the British rule in this country is thus a vital and immediate issue on which depends the future of the war and the success of the success of freedom and Democracy. A free India will assure this success by throwing all her great resources in the struggle for freedom and against the aggression Nazism, Fascism and imperialism.”<sup>ii</sup>

Just after announcing Quit India movement most of the important political leaders were immediately arrested and the movement became almost leaderless. In such circumstances women came out to carry the movement. They were taking out procession, holding meetings and organizing strikes. They not only participated in non-violent activities but some of them also took part in revolutionary activities. Two women Usha Mehta and Aruna Asaf Ali played notable role in this movement. Usha Mehta operated an underground radio station in Bombay. The Congress Radio broadcast news of every 7.30 pm from August to November, 1942. For this act, Usha Mehta and her colleagues were arrested. She was imprisoned for several years and send to Yeraveda jail. Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the important women who gave the Quit India movement an iconic image. Responding to Gandhi’s ‘Do or Die’

slogan, she courageously hoisted the National Flag on 9 August, 1942 at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay. For this act, police tried to arrest her but she was successfully able to escape and remained underground for four years. She edited the monthly magazines 'The Inquilab' with Ram Mohan Lohia. A price of rupees Five thousand was announced by the Government as a reward who inform about her. Even Gandhi requested her to surrender, but she remained underground until this reward on her had been withdrawn.

In Bengal, women played significant role in this movement. They established khadi centers lead processions. The women of Tamluk sub division took out a procession and seven of them were arrested and imprisoned for two years. In Tamluk sub division women's role in this movement was very impressive, women of this area sacrificed their life and many of women were raped by the Government employees. A seventy three year old lady Smti Mangini Hazra was killed by the police who lead a procession. Like in Bengal, in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and other part of India, women also took part in this movement. In Uttar Pradesh, women lead procession and raided on Government office. For example, in 1942 a group of girls' student raided an office. In Punjab, in response to Gandhi's 'Do or Die' slogan students both boys and girls came forward. They lead processions; on November 10, 1942, one hundred and four students were arrested; among them two were girls. In this movement Rajkumari Amrita Kaur played a significant role, who organized processions and meetings.

During this movement women's participation were also seen in unlikely places like Bannu in North West Frontier Province, Meerut, Sagar and Madhya Pradesh. In these places the movement was led mainly by women. Like the other parts of India the women of Assam played an indispensable role in this movement. In the following there is a brief discussion about the role played by Assamese women in the Quit India movement.

#### **4.2. Role of Assamese Women in the Quit India Movement**

Quit India movement had a tremendous impetus towards the throw out of the British rule from India. This movement was also marked by large-scale participation of women along with male counterparts. As Gandhi considered women were fit for Satyagraha and non violence due to their patience and antipathy to violence. So Gandhi's view toward women and prevailing surcharged atmosphere of the 1940s encouraged women to participate more than ever. Assamese women were not left behind from it. Women participation from Assam whether it is direct or indirect can be seen as moderate or constructive and extremist or destructive. Moderate or constructive programmes can be termed as Gandhian way as it included promotion of Swadeshi goods, revival of hand spinning and domestic weaving; demonstration, picketing, rallying, non-cooperation to govt., leave from Govt. school, anticipate untouchability, prohibition of intoxicants and alcohol drugs etc. and so on. Everywhere women participation was tremendous. It was an attempt of the Assamese women to show their emancipation, political participation and self competence. The flow of the Gandhian way was carried out, and figures like Hemanta Kumari Devi (wife of Nabin Ch. Bardoloi), Dharmada Devi (sister of Nabinn Ch. Bardoloi); Nalini Bala Devi, Giriya Devi (sister of Tarun Ram Phookan), Kamalalaya Kakoti, Nikunjalata Chaliha, Chandra Prava

Saikiani, Rajabala Das etc. had played crucial role in popularized among women. Though this trend was popular during the Quit India Movement period, it had acquired a slightly different character in Assam. In this time Satyagrahies were divided as Shanti Bahini (Peace corps) and Mrityu Bahini (death corps). Both men and women were participated in both ways individually and collectively. Shanti Bahini worked to maintain peace and believed in Gandhian ways, whereas Mrityu Bahini's members were prepared to face death as their activities against the British were perilous (e.g. hoisting the national flag at Police stations). Though Shanti Bahini contribution in the movement can't be ignored, but when we talk about role of Assamese women in this regard, contribution of Mrityu Bahini has always been in fore front. Because, here many provided their supreme sacrifices responding to the call of Gandhi "Do or Die". 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.<sup>iii</sup> According to the plan both men and women participants of Gahpur, Dhekiyajuli, Bihali and Sootea marched towards police stations of the respected areas, the resisting police force open fired on the peaceful processionists at Gahpur and Dhekiyajuli. Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Devi and Kumoli Devi along with other male victims like Mukunda Kakoti died of bullet injuries on that spot and many others were severely injured. Amid such violence caused by the police, Tileswari Mahanta, a daring women volunteer, successfully hoisted the national flag at Bihali police station.<sup>iv</sup> Besides Darrang District, in some other places like North Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar etc. attempts were made to hoist the national flag on Govt. Buildings. On 15th Oct, 1942, eighty women from the villages near Teok made an abortive attempt to attack the police station without any leader of importance.<sup>v</sup> The women of Borpeta district attacked the Patacharkuchi Police Station and assaulted the police officers in retaliation to the police firing.<sup>vi</sup>

Though the Gandhian way was a popular method among Assamese revolutionaries, few frustrated people had lost their faith upon it, due to the massive retaliation by the British force. Despite Mrityu Bahini followed Gandhian way, yet many a time they took violent path. Many of them started underground movements as well as guerrilla warfare to attack British personnels. Nonetheless, communist elements also acted as an impact factor in this regard. In Sibsagar district Aikan Bhuyan of Mudaijan near Teok took the lead in setting fire to the Amguri High School. She conducted many secret meetings where she reportedly instigated a member of Congress youths to damage Govt. properties, while the saboteurs were engaged in their demolition activities she often volunteered for patrolling duty.<sup>vii</sup> The local Congress entrusted the task of carrying top secret messages from one place to another to Shudhalata Dutta and Reboti Lahon, who often had to travel long distances on foot to carry out their duty.<sup>viii</sup> In Nawgaon district Jaymoti Saikia cooperated with the revolutionary group to burn the Bebejia Road bridge on 25/26th August 1942. In that district, girls like Pitrani Saikia and Dagati Bora worked for the security of the underground male workers.<sup>ix</sup> Brajnav wives Gunawati Devi and Rakshada Devi helped their husband and his underground party workers to carry on their sabotage activities by providing them with food and shelter.<sup>x</sup> Ratnabala Phukan, a female member of the death squad (Mrityu Bahini), not only took part in the destruction of bridges and burning down of govt. buildings, but also allowed

her house to be used as a center of underground activities. Educated girls belonging to the secret groups were used in transmitting secret circular and bulletins. Another women, Budheswari Hazarika took an active part in sinking cargo boats carrying military supplies through the Brahmaputra river.<sup>xi</sup>The revolutionaries specially from Assam also came under influence of the ideology of Azad Hind Fauj led by Subhas Ch. Boss, and many girls from Assam were enthusiastic to join its female wing Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

#### **4.3. Role of Women as Presented in *Mritrunjay* :**

As it was discussed before that the females played the important role in the 'swaraj' or Quit India movement. The Jnanpith Award winning novel *Mrityunjay* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, which represents a graphic description of the Panikhaiti derailment, as an impactful activities related to the Quit India movement of Assam. The narrative presents the involvement of Assamese people, the dichotomy between the Gandhian path of achieving the independence and the revolutionary vision of Subhas Chandra Bose. Apart from the graphical representation of the nature of 'swaraj' in Assamese society it also presents the participation of women. When majority of the man folk were inside the prison or already sentenced death. The female took the responsibility of conducting the movement. They support their man folk in delivering message, showing path to escape or many more. "...now a young woman had turned out to be more spirited than all the young men. There seemed to be no fear of the police..." (Bhattachayya,347). Another remark by Bal Bahadur, "...a competent woman does the work of a hundred men. The women subalternized with different roles and regulations of the society so far, found crossing the boundaries of society and participated in the reformation of the nation.

The Quit India movement, apart from being the influential movement in the process of achieving the independence also breaks various stigma related to the female folk of Assamese society. There are two different pictures can be traced in the narrative, one miserable, pathetic, dependent women without education and other holding the power to sacrifice herself for the nation.

What use did girls have for studies and learning? They were like resting bees. They were there today, would be married tomorrow and becomes mother soon after. What would they do with their studies then? That is how their guardians thoughts. (Bhattacharyya 269-270)

Another level of marginalization can be found with the practice of 'child marriage'. In this narrative the character Anupama, Kasonmoti who lost their husbands at a very young age, turned into widow. They were abandoned by their family the stigma of 'bad- luck' attached to widow and the families didn't want extra financial burden. The survival of widow "...and being dead were about the same thing. Lifelong repression of the body, an austere vegetarian diet and the exaltation of the deceased husband to godhood characterized such widowhood. Life became something unreal"(Bhattacharyya366).

But the motive of 'swaraj' breaks all those restrictions of the society. As it was uttered by Mohoda Gossai to his wife, "This stepping out of yours...it is good you know. Come out further, come and stand in the same row with Dimi. Then your entity as a helpless woman will be transformed. In your mind, there will be created the might of an able woman. And that power is the real woman" (Bhattacharyya194). Characters like Dimi, Koli Baideu, Gossaini who kept aside their personal sorrow and worked for the nation. Koli Baideu, a widow was an active freedom fighter who got all the information regarding various activities of things happening around. She spreads the knowledge among the fellow women and encourages them to participate in the freedom struggle. Apart from that she also helps the various victims like Subhadra, who was rapped by the soilders.

This struggle for 'swaraj' also breaks the notion of 'untouchability'; Dimi, a Mikir girl who actively worked for the help of revolutionaries. Where she was passing a taunting comment by saying, "If it is tea you want, I can brew some. Do you follow, Hossain? Or won't you have tea that I make? (Bhattacharyya138). Where there was character like Ahina Konwar, who refuses to take tea with the fear of losing his caste. On the other hand Gossain says, "All these Brahminic observances and religious pretences must be given up"(Bhattacharyya, 139). There was a difference between irrational beliefs and religion. "The sooner we demolish all this, the better... I mean caste, untouchability and all the rest"(Bhattacharyya, 140). Because all these notions doing nothing more than breaking the unity among the people in achieving the social goal. People's from different castes like Mikir, Kachari, Garo, Fisherman, Gossain everyone stands together for the greater perspective.

The female characters were so firm besides having so much personal sadness, oppression. For example Anupoma, the wife of a police officer who was killed by the revolutionaries, cast aside all her personal sorrow and went out to provide shelter to the revolutionary like Rupnarayan and his companions. She told her sister in law that she was thinking about the sufferings and sorrows of the countless revolutionaries, oppressed people. Dimi saw the death of her loved one, Dhanpur but never lost the spirit of fighting for the 'swaraj'.

Another important aspect related to the female folk is that the matter of security. While some part of the female came out of the household on the other hand some had to experience the sexual assault. For "...a maiden's greatest foe is her own body"(Bhattacharyya,17). For example, the character Subhadra who was rapped in the hand of military and she became the victim and killed herself. It is not only the military who used to exploit women but also some of the local people who also fullfill their lust by taking the advantage of the untidy situation. For example Saikia, after arresting every other active members who were involved in the Quit India movement. With the support of police power he wanted to fulfill his lust for Dimi. When Dimi was broken with the lost of his beloved she had to deal with the question of security. But her strong will never let Saikia to achieve his goal.

## **5. Conclusion:**

The role that had played by women from Assam during the Quit India Movement is remarkably too high that, many a time it seems as surpassed the role of women all other parts of the country. The victimization was not limited with those women who had directly

participated in the movement, but it was almost all the women of that time who suffered a lot. As movement was started in 1942 British government had left no stone unturned to suppress it, and gave freehand to police and military forces that they could take any measure. Women were badly victimized by it. They were open fired on the processionist where women also a part of. Other atrocities and punishment was there on those who were arrested. But the stories of the suffering of women were not limited here. Women those who had not directly participated in the processions or rallies and stayed at home serving and taking care of the family in the absence of male revolutionaries, many a time they were assaulted even raped by police and militaries as they were daughters, sisters, wives or mothers of revolutionary persons. Despite countless persons had participated in the struggle but noticeable fact is that like other subaltern sections of the society, women's contribution to national struggle in general and Quit India movement in particular, seems underestimated and only a few names are in forefront. It is basically because, many fact and figures are still unexplored and unrevealed, such as what were the reasons that inspired the women to participate in the Quit India movement more than ever? It may be because of the position of women, socio-economic, political conditions of the society of that particular time, patriarchal structure, and human psyche and so on. But it is also not entirely true that no one tried to deal with it. Literature is the mirror which reflects the condition of that society and in this regards Assamese literature is not far behind from it. Many eminent writers tried their best to portray that period through their literary works; based on the experience of the struggle period or historical facts they had gained from different sources. One of such work is Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Mritrunjay*. It is not just a novel but a *Document of Records* of the facts and figures which displays the role of Assamese women in the Quit India Movement, socio-economic and political position of women in the society. He tried to illustrate some of the salient factors which were responsible for the great number of women participation in the Quit India Movement. For him rise of nationalism sentiment was one of the prime factors, but along with it, it was the struggle not only against the British rule but also against the prevailing patriarchal constructs of the society.

But surprisingly most of the participants were still in ignominious darkness, still remained unexplored. It is high time explore the hidden and countless sacrifices made by those participants. Their struggles should be given respects as the mainline martyrs. This paper made an attempt to explore some of such marginalized and victimized voices of women participations from the Assamese society by taking the fictional work *Mritrunjay* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya as a reference.

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<sup>i</sup> Chandra, Bipan *History of Modern India* p322

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> Puzari, Rekha & Kazumi Mazane *Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India*

<sup>iv</sup> Sharma, D *op.cit.*, p248

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*(iii)

<sup>vii</sup> Sharma Puzari, *op.cit.*,p174

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*(iii)

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*(vii)

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