



Influence of Gandhi on Assamese women and their contribution in the non-cooperation movement

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Abstract

Non-Cooperation movement marked as one of the most important event in the Indian freedom movement. It was the first all India level mass movement where people from every section and every parts of India participated. This movement led to the rise of Gandhi as a mass leader who appealed everyone to follow his idea of Non-Violent Non-Cooperation against the British Government. His idea of Non-Violence and the constructive programs like spinning of khadi, boycotting foreign clothes attracted the women. Women from Assam also influenced by Gandhi's appeal and actively participated in this movement with full enthusiasm. This paper is a study about how Gandhi influenced the Assamese women to participate in this movement and what were contribution in this movement.

Keywords: Gandhi, women, Assam, non-cooperation, congress

Introduction

Women played a very important role in the Indian freedom movement. But they didn't get much space in the History writings of the Indian Freedom movement, especially, the women of North East India. Patriarchal approaches of the Indian Society as well as the approaches of the early freedom fighters towards the women are responsible for the inadequate participation of women in the early phase of the Indian freedom movement. Women of North East India, especially, the Women of Assam played a very significant role in the Freedom movement. But, like any other states of India women of Assam also looked upon as subordinate to men. As Sagar Bourah said, there is a widely prevalent proverb "Nari Patar talar laow" (Women are like the guard covered with leaves) is the best reflection of disinclining attitude of men towards women. Though few persons like Hemchandra Barua, Jaduram Barua, Gunabhiram Barua and Lakshminath Bezbarua made some efforts for upliftment of women but in true sense it did not have much impact. It was only in the early years of the 20th century the upliftment of women started in Assam due to the influence of modern education. In order to bring women in the freedom movement of India Gandhi played a very important role. He understood the importance of women participation in the political movement and that is why he said, "We have kept our women away from these activities of ours and have thus become victims of a kind of paralysis. The nation walks with one leg only. All its work appears to be only half or incompletely done." He knows that without the active participation of the people from every section, especially, without the participation of women he cannot overthrow the British Government. "Entrenched ideologies that assume that politics is the world of men and that women's role should be confined to the domestic domain serve to back up myths about women in politics without addressing the core of what constitutes politics, namely, power. That politics is a struggle not for authority alone, but for the power it entails to make changes, is not always recognized, restricting the

space of the political to public institutions alone." Since the time of the Non-cooperation movement women of Assam started to come out from their home and participated in a large number in the freedom struggle. During this time a number of women organizations were formed which played a very significant role in the freedom movement. Although their number was very less in compare to their male counterparts but their contribution was equally significant. During all three major mass movements i.e. Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement organized by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress women participation was quite significant in compare to earlier movements. It was Gandhi's political strategy that brought women from Assam in large number in freedom movement along with the women of other part of India. Gandhi's political movements were based on his philosophy of Satyagraha. This Satyagraha consists of two things: Truth and Non-Violence which makes Gandhian movement ideal for women participation. Because, it was not possible for most of the women to participate in a violent movement.

Gandhi's Idea of Non-Violent Non-Cooperation and the Women of Assam:

The political scene in Assam was marked by the annexation of Assam by the British in 1826 through the treaty of Yandaboo which created extreme anarchy and political chaos in Assam. Later in 1905 when Bengal was partitioned Assam was also effected Assamese people actively participated in the anti-partition movement. But the Non-Cooperation movement marked as a new phase in the political history of Assam. A large number of Assamese people irrespective of caste, class and gender participated in this movement. In 1920, Gandhi started the Non-Cooperation movement and it drawn a large number of men and women in this movement. It was the first all India level mass movement organized by the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi. Gandhi influenced every section of the society with his idea of non-violent movement. The

most important feature of this movement was the extensive participation of women across India. "He was aware of women's potential for passive resistance and projected them as symbols of courage, intelligence, perseverance, robust independence and power and not as stereotypes of submission, subservience, self effacement, helplessness and patience". With the formation of Assam Provincial Congress Committee in 1921 Assam was drawn to the national mainstream politics. It was the period of Non-Cooperation movement and the people of Assam also responded to the call of the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi. During that time Assamese women participated in the movement under the banner of Assam Chatra Sanmilian and Assam Sahitya Sabha till the formation of Assam Mahila Samity in 1926. But, initially the participation of women from Assam was very less and only few women from Congress family background participated in this movement. Some of them are Bidyutprova Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi, Girija Devi, Nalinibala Devi, Pushpalata Das, Guneswari Nath, Chandraprova Saikiani, Dharmada Devi. They took up organizational and publicity work and started to propagate the message of the movement among the people. Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 had sparked enthusiasm among the Assamese people. Wherever he visited for meeting in almost every town he organized separate meeting for the women, where hundreds of women participated. He realized that with the introduction of Non-Violent movement he can draw a larger section of people in the freedom movement especially, the women who cannot actively participate in the violent movement. "Women would have found it difficult to join an armed struggle in large numbers. But when it came to undergoing suffering, facing lathi-charges, picketing for hours on end in the summer or the winter, women were probably stronger than men." His appeal reached to every section of the Assamese women. "One of the foremost examples of this was Mongri, who was a labourer in a tea garden. She was also an alcoholic. She was so influenced by Gandhi that she not only gave up drinking but also actively participated in the anti-Liquor drive." She was the first women from Assam to be killed during this movement. Similarly, Chandraprabha Saikiani after being inspired by Gandhi's ideals left her government job and joined the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921 and then organized the women in the villages to do the same. Post Non-Cooperation movement Chandraprabha Saikiani emerged as a most prominent female figure in Assam and also actively participated in the political struggle against the British Government. The Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity was formed under her leadership in the year 1926, which played a very pivotal role in the later years of the freedom movement and also created several female leaders for future political and movement in Assam. On one occasion, when a Congress leader of Guwahati named Krishna Barua was arrested her mother came out to the street and started to spread the message of Non-Cooperation by touring Village to Village. When a spinning school was started at Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir at Guwahati this lady was given full responsibility of managing it. Even the

women from Barak Valley also came out in good numbers under the leadership of Sibsundari Devi and Saudamani Devi and they also formed an association named Silchar. Gandhi's idea of spinning khadi and boycotting foreign clothes had left tremendous impact on Assamese women as most of them were involved in traditional weaving at their home which was badly affected due to the coming of the British Government. The campaigns to popularize khadi, as Ishita Banerjee Dube quotes Lisa Trivedi, "privileged a visual discourse of the nation' and turned charkha into a visual symbol that spread 'the idea of a national community". By introducing khadi program in this movement Gandhi raised simple ordinary women to the status of fellow workers. Those women who cannot come out from their home they also felt counted in this movement simply by spinning khadi at home. During his visit to Assam in 1921 he observed Assamese loom and was very impressed. Gandhi, "expressed the hope that with a loom in every home Assam could take swadeshi earlier than any other provinces in India." All the Congress leaders of Assam took the khadi program seriously and started to spread the importance of khadi both politically and economically among the people of Assam. "Interestingly, one Lakshmi Das, a science student, made out a small and handy spinning machine and formed an organization called Bandar Sena (monkey brigade,) a girls' volunteer corps to spread the message of Swaraj through the khadi programme". Other constructive programmes like prohibition of liquor and opium received widespread popularity among the Assamese women. One of the anti-opium workers named Dariki Dasi Baruah of Golaghat was arrested for actively participating in the anti-opium program. Women from Assam also picketed in front of the liquor shops. They also contributed to the Tilak Swaraj Fund in both cash and kind. Some of them even donated their ornaments to this fund.

Methodology

Both Historical and analytical method followed for the preparation of this paper. Contemporary literature, Government records and collected works of Mahatma Gandhi was used as primary sources of this paper. As a secondary source published books, journals and periodicals, newspapers etc has been used for the preparation this paper.

Conclusion

The Non-Cooperation movement left a huge and long term impact on Assamese Women and society in general. This movement gave a new energy to the women of Assam which helped them to prepare for future political participation. The Non-Cooperation movement created a new band of dedicated women leaders in Assam who were later actively participated in the freedom movement. Due to their active participation in this movement political and social awareness created among them which also helped them to fight against different social evils and also to fight for the upliftment of Assamese women. Due to this political and social awareness among them several women

organization formed post Non-Cooperation movement in Assam. Now men also understood that how much the active participation of women can bring changes in the political movement. This brought a new dimension in the politics and society in Assam post Non-Cooperation movement. Due to this movement Gandhi also emerged as a mass leader.

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