

Reform in The Nineteenth Century: Efforts to Modernize Women's Role in Assam

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Abstract

During the time of colonial rule in India, the first historical accounts of Indian women are produced. These accounts tell of an ancient time, when women were held in high esteem followed by a long period when their status declined. When the colonial ruler came on the scene and their narratives introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities and these ideas were adopted by enlightened Indians. Colonial rule in Assam triggered a series of sweeping changes, not only in its economy and polity, but in its society and culture as well. The British brought with them new knowledge, ideas, institutions, beliefs, values and technology. Raja Rammohan Roy's (1772-1833) name is usually listed first among those of nineteenth century reformers concerned with improving women's status in India, Historians have called him the "father of modern India", a "champion of women's rights", and a feminist. The necessary for meaningful social reform in Assam was first articulated by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, although his brother Haliram Dhekial Phukan had identified certain prevailing evils.

Keywords: *Women, Colonial, Assam, Reform, Nationalism*

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Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the "women question" loomed large. This was not a question of "what do women want?" but rather "how can they be modernized?" It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the foreign rulers had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. James Mill, in his influential "History of British India", argued that women's position could be used as an indicator of society's advancement.

Later in the century, as part of the continuous process of legitimating British rule, Sir Herbert Hope Risley characterized the Indian intellectual and political ideas, but unconcerned with reforming society. Risley was pessimistic about, the general progress of India without reform. He concluded his comments: History affords no warrant for the belief that the enthusiasm of nationality can be kindled in sordid and degenerate surroundings. A society which accepts intellectual inanition and moral stagnation as the natural condition of its womankind cannot hope to develop the high qualities of courage, devotion and self sacrifice which go to the making of nation.

Anandaram's proximity to the American Baptist Missionaries and to the Bengali intelligentsia during his brief stint at the Hindu College, Calcutta, contributed immensely towards his liberal and advanced ideas. He had an unflinching faith in the efficacy of British rule and sincerely believed that Assam could be transformed through a series of liberal reforms.

By the second half of the nineteenth century these were reform groups in all parts of British India, they focused attention on sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, purdah, prohibitions on female education, devadasis (temple dancers wedded to the Gods), and the patrilineal joint family, their activity acted as a stimulus

and encouragement to reform minded individual in other areas and gradually reformist organizations with an all India identity began to emerge.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this topic:

- A. The study highlights the women emancipation in colonial Assam.
- B. To highlight the social transformation of women role in nationalist phrases.

Methodology:

This research article is based on secondary sources, basically, books, articles, historical books etc.

The research article has been formulated within historical and analytical method. The study is based on secondary sources basically collected from books, journal and newspapers etc.

Gunabhiram Barua, pioneer of women empowerment to expressed liberal ideas from childhood under the influence of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, was deeply influences by the Rammohan Roy's Brahmo movement. During his stay at Calcutta between 1851 and 1857, the impact of the Bengal Renaissance on Gunabhiram was so great that he began working for social reconstruction at a very early age. He married a widow, Bishnupriya after the death of his first wife, Brajasundari. This was after the widow re-marriage Act of 1856. His daughter, Swarnalata, also remarried after the death of her husband.

Hemchandra Barua also wrote extensively on women's issues and his liberal attitude and tremendous zeal for social reform found reflection in his forceful writing. He championed the cause of widow remarriage as reasonable not only for the sake of equality of the genders but also on the ground that the system was already an accepted notion among the non-brahmin communities in Assam.

The introduction of women in non-cooperation movement had created additional pace for nationalism in Assam. Gandhi's call to women had an immediate liberating effect and he was able to draw large number of women into the struggle. He was aware of women's potential for passive resistance and projected the a symbols of courage, intelligence, perseverance, robust independence and power and not as stereotypes of submission, subservience, self-effacement, helplessness and patience. The fact that there was no material weaponry involved in the Gandhian programme, made women equal or perhaps even better fighters and they participated wholeheartedly in the campaigns, protests, fasts and donated generously to the cause of freedom. As Geraldine Forbes has observed, "the nature of their work influenced how women saw themselves and how others save their potential contribution to national development.

In the beginning, the conservative society in Assam stood in the way of the participation of women in the movement and active participation was limited to a small section of women like Bidyutprova Devi, Girija Devi, (sister of Tarun Ram Phukan), Hemanta Kumari Devi, Pushpalata Das, Guneswari Nath and Chandraprova Saikia among others. All of them belonged to or had connections with families of congress leaders. They organized meetings, both in rural and urban areas to spread the message of non-cooperation, swadeshi and constructive work. But their task was not easy. They often had to confront hostile situations, especially in remote rural areas, but the fact that they persisted despite threats to their lives on several occasions, is testimony to their commitment to the cause.

Ghandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 provided the much-needed impetus to their work. His appeal went beyond the so called 'respectable' women to even those women marginalized by middle class society. 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. Mongri died in

a clash that occurred during the picketing of liquor shops and was the first women in Assam to be killed for participation in the Non-cooperation Movement. In Godebori a remote village in Kmarup district, Bhanumati Talukdar a mother of three children, enrolled herself as a full time worker of the congress. Referred to as Volunteerani Bai by the local people, Gandhi called her the Sarojani of Assam. Pramila Medak of the Mising community of Golaghat, remained an active worker despite being excommunicated by her community for defying social restrictions and joining the movement. When the Non-cooperation Movement had spread like wildfire, the Prince of Wales decided to visit India despite the opposition of the congress.

Gandhi's Dandi March (12 March - 6 April 1930) from Sabarmati Ashram near Ahmedabad to Dandi, a village on the coast attracted enormous publicity within the country and even abroad. The congresses in the meanwhile send guidelines to all the provincial committees to hasten preparation for civil disobedience movement. The participation of women in this movement in Assam was a great historic event.

In 1930 Pushpalata Das a young satyagrahi who had joined the Banar Sena to propagate Khadi at age of six, along with Sarla Saxena, Punya Prava Barua and Jyotsna Majumder, organized the Mukti Sangha to mobilize girls in the national movement. Their fiery speeches electrified young minds who pledged to fight for poorna swaraj. The rapidly increasing membership activities of the Sangha, caused grave concern to the Government and Pushpalata, who was then the union secretary, Panbazar Girls High School, was expelled from institution. The government agreed to reinstate her on condition that her mother signed a bond guaranteeing her 'good behaviour'. Swarnalata, Pushpalata's Mother refused to give this undertaking. The support of her family emboldened her further and rather than defusing her spirit, the incident ignited the sparking Pushpalata's into a flame. Inspired by her courage and commitment to the cause, several student committees started imparting training in martial arts for Girls in order 'to meet exigencies' in the ensuing civil disobedience movement. According to an official source, all together one thousand four hundred ninety four persons were arrested upto August 31 and of them thousand ninety persons, including eighty women were convicted till mid August. The movement had its repercussions in the hills as well, inspired by teaching of Gandhiji, the Naga Queen Gaidilieu and her followers "dreamt of freedom for her people raised the banner of independence and call her people to rally round it". At the order of political agent of Manipur, Gaidilieu was captured, put in Imphal jail and sentenced to transportation for life in January 1933. With a large number of men behind the bars, women came out in thousand defying prohibitory orders to demonstrate their solidarity with the programme of the Sal Satyagraha. Women's power had been strengthened by the organizational activities carried out during the years before of the movement and the formation of the mahila samities. The main thrust of their activity during this period was their anti opium campaign, which gain momentum as the days past. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee report of 1930 records with appreciation the tremendous participation of rural women along with their counterparts during this phase of the movement. During the quit India movement women came out in large numbers but despite their massive involvement in the movement, the often found themselves sidelined in the organizational works. Women leaders of the struggle campaign for separate women's wings. It was only in 1940 women's wings were made an integral part of congress at both the national and provincial level. In Assam, the women wing was set up in September 1940 with Pushpalata Das and Amalprava Das as joint secretaries. In 1941, the All Assam Girls Students Committee was formed at Shillong. Female activism was very visible during this phase of movement. In the face of unprecedented police repression and with large number of men in prison, prominent women leaders took upon themselves the task of coordinating the activities. Chandraprava Saikiani was one of the main guiding forces among women, while the majority of the women concentrated on programmes of reconstruction and as congress volunteers, also enrolled themselves as member of the Shanti Sena, small but determined section was much more radical in their activity. Violence and sabotage were their weapons of choice. In 1942 the Mrityu Bahini was formed to carry out militant activity in a more organize manner. Ratnamala Phukan, Khahuli Nath, Buddheswari Hazarika, Damayanti Bora were all active member of the Mrityu Bahini and were acclaimed as exemplary women among radical circle, but there were hundreds of ordinary women who from behind the scenes, made immense contribution during this movement. They were hiding weapons sheltering fugitives and encouraging men, using their domestic rule to cover subversive and revolutionary activities.

Conclusion:

The involvement of many women in the nationalist struggle tied women's right to the freedom movement through a unique Indian feminist nationalism. The post-independence era the Constitution of India promised equality, participation in nation building and a new wave of women rights in India. The contemporary feminist movement, beginning in the late 1970s has brought women's issue to the attention of all Indians.

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