CHAPTER - IV

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Even as the nineteenth century contradictions regarding the nature of education to be imparted to women in Assam had not been resolved, new forces and situations emerged in the twentieth century to further awaken women’s consciousness. With no material weaponry involved, the freedom movement had an immediate liberating effect, as women became equal or perhaps even better fighters, campaigning, protesting, fasting and donating to the cause of freedom. While public and private spaces continued to exist as separate categories, usual definitions of appropriate behavior were redefined. The active participation of women like Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari, Puspalata Das, and Chandraprova Saikiani among others symbolised the involvement of Assamese women in the freedom struggle. Women’s organisation came to be formed, though initially they were not politically oriented. The emerging political consciousness of the women was a product of their environment.

The Treaty of Yandaboo, 24 February, 1826, saw the six hundred years old Ahom dominance in Assam being eclipsed by the English East India Company. The people, who initially welcomed the British, soon understood their imperialistic maneuvers and expectedly attempts were made to oust the new rulers and restore the old Ahom monarchy. The later decades of the nineteenth century characterised by a new awakening in Assam contributed to the growth of new responses to the emerging realities. The Press in Assam, especially the vernacular Press alongwith associations like the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Tezpur Ryot Sabha, The Assam Association, Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha,
Assam Chatra Sammilan, Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Assam Mahila Samiti proved to be effective platforms for the dissemination of modern political consciousness and consequently in the development of nationalism.

Prior to 1915, there was no women organisation in Assam. The women of Dibrugarh were the first to form an association of women, namely the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in 1915. Its primary concern was the welfare of women and children. The Dibrugarh initiative was followed by the establishment of similar societies in different parts of the province, at Nowgong, Tezpur etc. Though primarily non-political, the Mahila Samities soon became attracted to the programmes of Gandhi and actively participated in the national movement. However, it was only with the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926, that the women of Assam finally organized themselves at the provincial level under the leadership of Chandraprova Saikiani. The mass mobilization of women through the Assam Mahila Samity (later renamed as the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS) in the 1920s and the 1930s was undoubtedly a major factor contributing to women's large scale participation in the freedom movement in Assam.

In the national perspective, the year 1919 proved to be very crucial in the history of India. The year saw the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as a national leader, who launched the Satyagraha\textsuperscript{1} in the same year against the imposition of the Rowlatt Act. Further, the Punjab wrongs along with the Khilafat issue prompted Gandhi to launch the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 for the attainment of Swaraj. Promotion of Swadeshi, revival of hand-spinning and

\footnote{\textit{Satyagraha}, a non-violent movement based on truth.}
weaving, removal of untouchability, collection of rupees one crore for the All India Tilak Memorial Swarajya Fund were some of the programmes included in the Non-Cooperation Movement. The plan of action included boycott of legislature, courts and educational institutions, surrender of titles, honours, official positions and the setting up of National schools and colleges.

Assam with a population of about forty lakhs was asked to contribute one lakh rupees to the Fund, enroll one lakh four-anna Congress members and to introduce twenty six thousand Charkhas. Assam achieved the target within the stipulated date of 30 June, 1921. On June, 1921, the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, (A.P.C.C.) was formed. After an initial hesitation, Assam plunged into the non-cooperation movement. A National school in the form of Tilak Memorial School was established at Gauhati. The Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam gained momentum with the visit of Gandhi to Assam for twelve days. A remarkable feature of the movement in Assam was the large scale participation of students and women.

Response of Assamese women to the Nationalist Movement:

The social reform movement of the nineteenth century, the spread of education among women, and the policies of the British Government among others had a profound impact on the lives, role and activities of the Indian women. The nationalist struggle in India against British colonial rule brought about the political mobilization of both men and women. It encouraged middle-class and elite women to adopt new role models in the public domain and to

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3. A.C. Bhuyan, S. De, cp.cit, p. 23

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engage in a range of activities like social reform, spreading the nationalist message and mobilization for the movement.

Gandhi’s call for a non-violent non-cooperation movement had profoundly stirred the whole country which witnessed an unprecedented wave of nationalistic enthusiasm among men and women. He evoked India’s sacred legends, when he asked women to join the national movement. He urged women to take the Swadeshi vow, give up foreign goods and spin everyday. India’s poverty, Gandhi explained, was caused by ignoring indigenous crafts and purchasing foreign made goods. Gandhi’s involvement of women has been generally analysed as a carefully planned strategy that would fulfil a specific political purpose in the nationalist movement. His use of household objects like Charka and Khadi can also be understood as essential ‘tools’ to involve women in the national struggle, but without shifting any gender inequalities within or outside the household. The symbolic representation of women could also be seen as a patriarchal extension of the nationalist project. Gandhi, infact, legitimized the active participation of women for he believed in their innate non-violent and self sacrificing nature, and felt that this character made them suitable proponents for the philosophy of Satyagraha. The success of Gandhi’s appeal lay in the fact that he was reaffirming and not contradicting existing sexual stereotypes.

The participation of women was both direct and indirect. Direct participation could be interpreted as taking up spinning and weaving, boycott of shops selling foreign goods and liquor, leaving government schools and colleges.

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5 Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, U.K., 2007, p-125
7 S. Ram Sharma, ed., Women and Education, N. Delhi, 1995, p. 132
and propagating the use of Khadi. Indirect participation of women could be understood as being supportive to their husband’s nationalist activities or raising their children, symbolically referred to as ‘children of the nation’. They further managed their households’ economic hardship caused by their husbands commitment to nationalism, gave moral support to women activists etc. Infact, Vijay Agnew delineates three categories of women in nationalist politics. First, women who were not members of any political organization and were just part of the general population; second, women who were involved only in specific Gandhian activities, for example, spinning the Charkha, weaving Khadi or living in ashrams; and third, a small elite group of women who were involved publicly and participated in all aspects of the movement.\(^8\) It could well be argued that the feature of non-violence facilitated women’s equal participation for women amply possessed the qualities required for a non-violent struggle, namely, tolerance, courage and capacity to endure suffering. At the national level there were many leading women, namely Kasturba Gandhi (Gujrat), Sarojini Naidu (Bombay), Uma Nehru (U.P.), Basanti Devi and Kamala Devi Chattopadhya (Bengal), Asadi Banu (Lahore) and a host of others.

The impact of the non-cooperation movement was also felt in Assam and one of the most remarkable features was the participation of students and women. The latter came out of their traditional domestic spaces to identify with the national cause.\(^9\) Mostly, the urban elite women, especially those belonging to the families of Congressmen were the first to take part in the movement. The names of Bidyut Prova Devi, Girija Devi (sister of Tarun Ram Phukan), Hemanta

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\(^8\) Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, N.Delhi, 1979, p.10.
Kumari Devi, Dharmada Devi and Nalinibala Devi (the wife, sister and daughter of Nabin Chandra Bordoloi), Snehalata Bhattacharya, Guneswari Devi, Chandraprova Saikiani, Kiranmoyee Agarwalla (mother of Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla), Gyanada Khaund, Aidew Rajkhowa, Sashiprova Chaliha, Madhabi Sonowal, Ratneswari Phukanani, Labanya Rabha Barman, were only a few of the women who participated in the non-cooperation movement.\(^{10}\)

As the movement against British colonialism gained momentum, more and more women came to join the movement. In January, 1921, at Gauhati, a group of women at the initiative of Bidyutprova Devi, wife of Tarun Ram Phukan, proposed to take out a procession, violate Section 144 and court-arrest as part of the non-cooperation programme.\(^ {11}\) Nalinibala Devi gives the list of a handful of women from elite homes like Bidyutprova Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharya, Guneswari Devi, Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi, Dharmada Devi and Krishna Kanta Barua’s wife who came out with their unnamed associates and enrolled themselves as Congress volunteers.\(^{12}\) The ambience of these elite homes initiated its women into the cause of the nation, thereby blurring the boundaries between the public and the private. These women propagated the message of Gandhi among women in villages and also activity participated in the establishment of spinning schools, like the one established at Gauhati.\(^{13}\) Further, they along with a sizeable number of women joined a volunteer force, named, *Chetcha Sevak Bahini*, started by Debeswar Sarma and

\(^{10}\) The names are derived from *RECEFF, Assam, Dispur, 1979, Annexure II, newspapers and readings on the Freedom movement in Assam.*

\(^{11}\) Dipti Sarma, *op.cit, pp 64-65.*


\(^{13}\) *Ibid, p. 82*
organised by Muhimuddin Ahmed. This volunteer force took upon itself the task of spreading the message of non-cooperation, swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods and abstinence from opium in the rural areas.

Nalinibala Devi had mentioned in her autobiography Eri Aha Dinbor (The Bygone Days) that women volunteers of the Congress had to face objectionable behavior from the village people. It transpires that the struggle against imperialism was not fully understood by the innocent rural masses during the early phase of the struggle. The Congress workers efforts to propagate the message of Gandhi, often at times had to face the ire of the rural masses. Once in a village in Dibrugarh in 1921, the people chased away Hemanta Kumari Devi and her women associates, when they came in connection with some Congress work. On another occasion, Rajabala Das of Dibrugarh and her companions were surrounded by angry villagers with weapons when they tried to persuade some village women of Tengakhat village in Dibrugarh sub-division to become Congress volunteers. They were told to leave the place immediately or face consequences of being cut into pieces.

However, around the same time, one could also find a completely different picture in the same rural settings of Assam. Here, the spirit of nationalism among the rural masses, including its womenfolk was very much evident. Guneswari Mazumdar, wife of Nandamohan Mazumder, took the lead in organizing the women of Bamagar. At her initiative, a large meeting was organized in 1921 at Kaniabhatta village near Barnagar which was addressed by Bishnuram Medhi among others. On the same day the Barnagar Mahila

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14 Ibid.
16 Dipti Sharma, op.cit, p 66
Congress was formed with Srimati Mazumdar as its President. In the 1923 Congress session at Gaya, she sent a bundle of self-woven Khadi clothes for distribution among the people.\textsuperscript{17} Another women near Palasbari, popularly known as Volunteerani Bai, nicknamed by Gandhi as the ‘Sarojini of Assam’ enrolled as a Congress worker in 1921 to work with single minded devotion for the country leaving her husband and three children.\textsuperscript{18} A few other devoted women workers like Chadraprova Saikiani of Daisingimari village in Bajali in Kamrup district, responding to the call of boycott, gave up her job as a primary school teacher in Darrang near Tezpur. In 1918, she delivered a speech on prohibition of opium at Tezpur during the third session of the Assam Chatra Sammilan. She along with Kiranmayee Agarwalla was closely associated with the formation of the Tezpur Mahila Samiti in 1919.

The visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam in August, 1921, gave a great boost to the movement which was already gaining momentum. Just ahead of Gandhi’s visit to Assam, the Congress Reception Committee decided that all Congress workers would wear Khadi clothes during Gandhi’s stay in Assam.\textsuperscript{19} The women took up the decision as a challenge and handstitched the items before Gandhi’s arrival. Nalinibala Devi in her autobiography narrates how she, her sister Mrinalini along with other members of the family alone stitched five hundred caps. In the meeting at the residence of Tarun Ram Phukan, many women of the town and the nearby areas gathered to listen to Gandhi. His call to boycott foreign goods had so great an impact on the gathering that they spontaneously threw off their foreign belongings to the huge bonfire raised at the

\textsuperscript{17} Dipti Sharma, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 70
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid,} p.68.
end of the meeting and which subsequently became a regular feature at the end of each meeting. On 19 August, 1921, Gandhi attended three meetings, exclusively of women belonging to the Assamese, Marwari and Bengali communities.\(^{20}\) The meeting of the Assamese women was held in the Kamrup Natya Mandir. Ghanakanti Phukanani, an elderly lady, presented him a fine woolen shawl and a Seleng Kapur on behalf of the Assam Mahila Samiti.\(^{21}\) Begum Md. Ali who accompanied Gandhi to Assam also addressed women’s meetings organized in public places as well as in private residences.\(^{22}\) Gandhi was so much impressed by the weaving skill of the Assamese women, that in his article ‘Lovely Assam’ published in Young India, he expressed the hope that Assam with her womenfolk expert in spinning and weaving could take Swaraj early than the other provinces of India.\(^{23}\) Gandhi visited Tezpur on 21 August 1921, and addressed a meeting of women at the Bengali Theatre Hall. Here again Gandhi appreciated the skill of the women weavers of Assam and called upon them to devote more in spinning and weaving and popularize Khadi.\(^{24}\)

The enthusiasm generated by Gandhi’s visit further boosted the women workers in the subsequent stages of the non-cooperation movement. The response of women for the Tilak Memorial Fund was significant as the women of the Valley donated generously. In Sibsagar, women of the likes of Nikunjalata Chaliha, Bhubeneswari Devi, Kamalkali Barua, Nanibala Chaliha, Labanyalata Chaliha, Konkanbala Mahanta, Thaneswari Baruah and Mohini Baruah donated

\(^{21}\) Nalinibala Devi, op.cit. p.17.
\(^{23}\) Omeo Kumar Das, Liladhar Barua, op.cit., p-27
\(^{24}\) Omeo Kumar Das, op. cit., p. 69.
all their ornaments to the *Fund*. In the fund collection drive, the women from elite homes took the leading part.

The government viewed with concern the increasing association of women in the activities of the Congress and took steps for curbing their enthusiasm. For instance, the government withheld the payment of pension to Mr. Nilakanta Barua, a retired jailor, because a ladies meeting was convened at his residence in Gauhati on 8 December, 1921. The wives of Nilakanta Barua and Bipin Behari Bora, a retired Assistant surgeon, delivered fiery speeches. Kamala Kanta Bhattacharjee, father of Suresh Chandra Bhattacharjee, a leading Congress worker, also spoke in the meeting which was attended by around hundred women. The proceedings of the meeting were recovered by a C.I.D. Sub-Inspector through a female spy. The speakers urged upon the women to propagate *Charkha* and *Swadeshi* by boycotting foreign yarns and threads completely. The women were advised to discontinue *Purdah*. In the meeting itself, twenty women enrolled as Congress volunteers.

On 5 September, 1921, Tarun Ram Phukan, President of the Gauhati Town Congress Committee in his bid to spread the message of non-cooperation, addressed a meeting of the prostitutes to explain the objectives of *Swaraj*. The meeting was a success as a handful of women prostitutes gave up their profession and began to earn a decent living through spinning and weaving.

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 A.S.A, Political History of Assam (P.H.A.) record, History Sheets of Tarun Ram Phukan.
In Dibrugarh, Hemoprova Das, Rajabala Das, Joytora Gogoi, Nagendra Hazarika, Sashiprova Dutta along with scores of other women actively participated in the non-cooperation movement. Rajabala Das, who was pursuing her studies in Calcutta, was greatly moved by the nationalist euphoria in Bengal. She returned to Assam and immediately joined the movement. She became Secretary of the women’s wing of the Dibrugarh District Congress Committee. She opened training centers in Dibrugarh for popularizing spinning and weaving among the masses. 31

The women of Golaghat district, Madhavi Sonowal, Promila Medak, Swarnalata Bhattacharjee, Donikana Dutta, Labanyalata Barua, and Tankeswari Bhattacharya 32 among others took active part in the non-cooperation movement. They held public meetings, took out processions and picketed shops selling foreign goods and liquor. 33 Pramila Medak (Kanan) was an important women organizer among the Mishing women of Golaghat. She came out to join the movement in defiance of social restrictions for which she was excommunicated from the Mishing community. 34

Women from tribal communities also actively participated in the movement. As opium consumption was noticeably higher among them, eradication of opium consumption formed one of the major agendas in the movement. The visit of Gandhi had further intensified the campaign, with women even in rural areas taking part in picketing before opium shops and prevented the opium eaters from purchasing the stuff. Rangdoi Lalungani of Jagi Bhakatgaon of

32 R E.C.F.F. Assam
33 Anil Kumar Sharma, *Quit India Movement in Assam*, New Delhi, 2007, pp 127-128.
34 Dipti Sharma, *op.cit*, p. 77.
Nowgong district, a plains tribal woman, had a direct confrontation with the police when she along with a few other Congress workers tried to take away the opium from an opium eater of the village in 1922. Though Rongdoi was not arrested, several of the other volunteers were arrested in this connection. Prabhabati Devi of Puranigudam and Dariki Kachari were the other two important anti-opium workers from Nowgong.

The non-cooperation movement along with the name of Gandhi had also cast its spell on the tea-garden workers of Assam. In fact, concubines of a few European planters of Darrang district generously donated funds in the name of 'Gandhi Baba'. In this context, reference may be made of a tea-labour woman named Mongri or Malati Mem of Lalmati Tea Estate of Darrang district who incidently was a concubine of a European tea planter and also a habitual drunkard. Omeo Kumar Das narrates that when he along with Lakhidhar Sarma and others were picketing the liquor shops of that area in April, 1921, they convinced her to give up drinking as a gesture of support to the movement. Convinced, she not only gave up drinking, but engaged herself in helping the Congress volunteers in the eradication of opium consumption and also in other organizational works. However, she was soon killed by some government supporters in 1921. Incidentally, Mongri or Malati Mem was the first woman martyr of the non-cooperation movement in Assam. However, sadly enough, her name had not figured in the list of Martyrs of Assam.

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35 S.N. Deka, ed, Bharatiya Swadhinata Sangramat, Morigaon Mohkumar Barangini, Morigaon, 1972, p.3.
36 Omeo Kumar Das, op.cit. p.117.
37 Ibid, p.179.
38 R.E.C.F.F., Assam.

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Prominent national leaders, Madan Mohan Malavya and Rajendra Prasad visited Assam in 1922. Speaking in a woman's meeting in Gauhati at the residence of Tarun Ram Phukan, he exhorted the Assamese women to work for the popularization of Khadi and the promotion of home spun cloth industry. In Jorhat, Malavya advised the women to form Nari Mandalees (women associations) for an organized conduct of the movement. Malavya during his stay in Assam also visited Sibsagar and Dibrugarh and in both the places he specially addressed the women. This clearly indicates the importance of women in the Freedom struggle.

The first phase of the non-cooperation movement in Assam, 1921-22, saw the participation of a large number of women. However, social constraints stood in the way for a larger numbers of women, who remained confined in their homes, unable to participate either in the organizational work or attend meetings and join processions. In a women's meeting held on 1 May, 1921, the speakers, namely, Kuladhar Chaliha, Pandit Kanak Chandra Sarma and Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya spoke on the usefulness of spinning and weaving, together with the importance of Khadi. The younger women however refrained from attending the meeting for fear of criticism from the conservative sections of the society. The meeting was attended by only twenty-five elderly women including widows.

While defining the role of women in the nationalist struggle, one must not lose sight of the contributions made by those women who did not step out of their homes, but whose contributions were tremendous. When members of their family participated in the movement, the women adapted themselves to the changes

brought about by the nationalist movement. While maintaining traditional roles, they supported the men in their nationalist activities, managed the household economic hardships caused by the political commitment of their men, dissuaded them from consuming alcohol or opium, and actively took to spinning and weaving. The direct participation of women in the movement was not on a large scale, but whatever number participated, it provided a definite impact on the movement. Women from urban households participated more actively than their rural counterparts. It was because the urban women were more educated, politically conscious and more liberated than the rural women. The latter were under greater social restrictions which forbade them to go beyond the domestic spaces and into the streets to fight side by side with men.

The Government of Assam as in the rest of the country adopted repressive measures to thwart the success of the movement. Arrests, tortures etc were frequently, resorted to. Fines were forced upon the villagers on the slightest pretext which were realized by the use of force. But it could not deter the spirit of the women. A new awakening came among them and made them alive to new responsibilities to be shared by them with men for the attainment of freedom. 41

As noted earlier, the women of Assam became organized only since 1915 with the formation of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti followed by similar societies in other places of the province. But Assam lacked a provincial women’s organization, and it was only in 1926, that the Assam Mahila Samiti (AMS) was formed with Chandraprova Saikiani as its president. It was a socio-cultural organization devoted primarily to the cause of women and children, with no political objectives. For the promotion of the economic wellbeing of the women,

41 K.N. Dutta, op.cit., p.p. 59-60
the *Mahila Samiti* laid stress on spinning and weaving, which was also in conformity with the constructive programmes of the Congress. For facilitating the sale of the products of the women weavers, ‘*Sipini Bhorals*’ or weaver’s stores were opened. For example, the *Kamrup Mahila Samiti* opened such a store in Gauhati in 1928.

The changed political scenario of the country, with the struggle against British colonialism gaining spectacular momentum, the *Assam Mahila Samiti* (*A.M.S.*) could not but be affected by it. Durgaprosa Bora, as President of the first annual conference of the A.M.S. held at Goalpara in October 1927, called upon the women to boycott foreign goods by practicing *Swadeshi* and to take up spinning and weaving.

Meanwhile, the Kanpur session of the Congress, 1925, resolved to hold the forty-first session of the Indian National Congress at Gauhati in 1926. Leaders like Motilal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and even Tarun Ram Phukan and Gopinath Bordoloi had doubts about Gauhati’s ability to hold the session successfully. Pandu, near the Kamakhya temple was selected as the site for holding the session. Around seven hundred and fifty local volunteers, who also included twenty-five women worked tirelessly to make the site ready on time. Chandraprosa Sainkiani was a volunteer who was in-charge of the main gate to the

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A good number of women came to attend the session.

The Pandu session of the Congress at Gauhati was held from 26 to 28 December, 1926 with S. Srinivas Iyengar as the President. An outstanding feature of the session was the wonderful exhibition of Assam Khadi appreciated by one and all. Infact, khadi was liberally used and the whole pandal was covered with it. The credit undoubtedly goes to the Khadi weavers who were essentially the village women and girls who toiled hard for six months to get the Khadi ready.\textsuperscript{48}

It symbolizes the growing involvement of Assamese women in the national cause. Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, General Secretary of the Reception Committee in his report appreciated the devotion and patriotism of the Assamese women. It was patriotism alone which enabled them to cover the whole pandal with Assam khadi.\textsuperscript{49}

In 1928, a commission of seven exclusive British members under the leadership of Sir John Simon reached India to enquire into the working of the reforms of 1919. The Congress boycotted the Commission for not having any Indian member and held several demonstrations against it. Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State for India challenged the Indians to produce a constitution which would be acceptable for all. The Indians responded to the challenge by producing the \textit{Nehru Report} drafted under the leadership of Motilal Nehru. The Report among other recommendations, proposed dominion status for India.\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Dipti Sharma, \textit{op. cit}, p.116
\item Krishnanath Sarma, \textit{Krishna Sarmar Diary}, Gauhati, 1972, p. 106.
\item H.N. Barua, \textit{op.cit}, p.p. 21-22
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
In Assam, an All Parties Convention was held at the Curzon Hall in Gauhati on 29 October, 1928, to deliberate upon the Nehru Report. Kuladhar Chaliha presided over the convention. The Assam Mahila Samiti was also invited. Chandрапроva Saikiani attended the convention and it was for the first time that a representative from the A.M.S. was formally invited to attend a provincial level political conference. She actively took part in the deliberations and decisions of the convention.51

The next year, i.e. in 1929, the Lahore session of the Congress passed a resolution for the complete independence of India and the starting of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Accordingly, Independence Day was celebrated on 26 January, 1930 all over India. On 12 March, 1930, Gandhi violated the Salt Law by preparing salt at Dandi. Within no time, the movement gained strength and thousands of freedom lovers were put behind bars.

Assam’s response to the decision of the Lahore session of the Congress was initially not very clear, though the Independence Day was spontaneously celebrated almost everywhere. The Nowgong District Congress Committee directed its workers to celebrate Independence Day on the given day. In Kaliabor, more than four hundred women under the leadership of Guneswari Devi, Mohini Gohain, Darbai Mech and Kiranbala Bora came out in a procession to Nowgong town to attend the flag hoisting ceremony at Jubilee field. The procession further encouraged another group of women residing between Kaliabor and Nowgong town to join the march.52 The police in their bid to disperse the crowd, who had assembled to hoist the National Flag, resorted to arrests and lathicharge on the

51 Sadiniya Asamiya, 4-11-1928.
52 S.N.Deka, ed, op.cit, p.5
protestors, which among others included women leaders like Guneswari Devi, Darbai Mech, Muktabala Baisnavi and Mohini Gohain.53 A peaceful procession from Puranigudam near Nowgong, which also included a number of women, was also lathicharged when they came to attend the flag hoisting ceremony at Nowgong.

The Women of Assam participated in larger numbers in the Movement of 1930 than in 1920-21. They took out processions, prabhat-pheris, (morning processions), picketed shops selling liquor and foreign cloth, boycotted government schools, colleges etc. A handful of women leaders also emerged from this movement. Among them, Chandraprova Saikiani commented that even if the British government volunteered to grant Dominion Status, they should not go for it, nothing short of complete independence was acceptable to the Indians.54 The women organized meetings to arouse women and demonstrate their solidarity with the programme of Salt Satyagraha. One such meeting was held at Goalpara with Mohini Devi as its President. In Sibsagar the women took out processions in support of the Salt Satyagraha. Kamalabala Kakati, sister of Bimala Prasad Chaliha (who later became the Chief Minister of Assam), was arrested and jailed for six months in 1930 for her active role in the movement.55

The Report of the Simon Commission failed to satisfy the Indians. The continuance of the Civil Disobedience Movement made the Congress decide against sending any representative to the Round Table Conference in England. On the other hand, protests against the proposed conference were voiced throughout India including Assam. On 12 November, 1930, there took place a

53 Ibid, p.6
54 Dipti Sharma, op.cit, p. 130
55 Ibid, p.132.
*hartal* at Nowgong. It was observed in defiance of Section 144. A huge procession started from the Congress office carrying black flags and shouting slogans. A women’s procession under Guneswari Devi of Kaliabor also paraded the streets the same evening followed by a large number of people. The women’s procession was cordoned off and a number of them were manhandled. The women processionists were further lathicharged and many were injured.\(^{56}\)

To protest against the police brutalities, the people of Nowgong successfully organized a *hartal* on 13 November, 1930.\(^{57}\) On that day, twenty women, one with a baby on her back picketed in front of the Nowgong High School gate. Guneswari Devi and Muktabala Baishnabi were arrested and sentenced to fifteen day’s imprisonment. They became the first ever women in the province to have been imprisoned for participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They were treated as ‘Class B’ prisoners. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in its report for 1930 appreciated particularly the village women of Assam for their response to the movement. Guneswari Devi was arrested for the second time in 1932 for again participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The British Government viewed with concern the active participation of students in programmes of the Congress in Assam. Among the many circulars issued by the Government to curb students participation, the most important being the infamous Cunningham Circular of 19 May, 1930.\(^{58}\) The Circular notified that after the Summer Vacation students would be re-admitted in the Government schools only if their parents or guardians, and for students from

\(^{56}\) A.S.A, A.P.C.C. papers, APCC Secretary to A,ICC, 5 June, 1931 (H.F.M.R.)
\(^{57}\) Dipi Sharma, *op.cit*., p.134.
classes VII to X, the students themselves, give a written understanding that they would abstain from all political activities.\textsuperscript{59} Further, they would respect and abide by the disciplinary rules and orders of the school authority and the Education department.\textsuperscript{60}

The student community immediately reacted against the circular with agitational programmes. Their agitation soon merged in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They picketed in schools and colleges. Picketing commenced on the very day the Cotton College reopened after the Summer Vacations. A few women, mostly from elite households regularly picketed in front of the main gate of Cotton College. They were Basantalata Hazarika, Kamala Devi, Ratnabala Bora, Anna Baruah, Durgaprova Bora, and Ghanikanti Bora among others.\textsuperscript{61} On 27 July, 1930, the APCC organized a meeting in the Curzon Hall in Gauhati. Many students, including girls attended the meeting. Puspalata Saikia (later Das), a fourteen year old girl, who was later to play a prominent role in the Freedom movement in Assam, attended the meeting with much enthusiasm.

Puspalata became so much involved with the national struggle that she soon organized an association of girls named '\textit{Mukti Sangha}' to mobilize girls. Her other associates were Sarala Saxena, Jyotsna Mazumder and Punyaprabha Barua. Puspalata became the founder Secretary of the \textit{Sangha}. She and Sarala took a pledge with their own blood that complete independence of the country was their only goal. Membership of the \textit{Sangha} increased rapidly. Puspalata who was also Union Secretary of the Panbazar Girls’ High School successfully

\textsuperscript{59} A.S.A, Confidential A, File No-315 c of 1930; Appendix-5.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} R.E.C.F.F., Assam, pp.867, 869, 878.
organised a picketing in front of the School gate to protest against the death sentence on Bhagat Singh. The government expelled her from School.\textsuperscript{62}

Chandraprova Saikiani, a participant in the 1921-22 movement, also made important contributions during the 1930-34 phases of the movement. She involved herself in the fund collection drive of the Congress. She organised meetings at places like Puranisatra near Jakhalabandha, Kaliabor, Chaparmukh in Nowgong district, etc. Her speeches had an electrifying effect on the people and she had the ability to rouse their patriotic and nationalistic spirit. Men and women volunteered to donate whatever they could, while boys and girls in hundreds enrolled themselves as Congress volunteers. "The district administration of Nowgong became alarmed at the activities of Chadraprova. It considered that her speeches were instigating the people against the Government. An order was issued by the Government under Section 144 directing Chandraprova to leave Nowgong within 24 hours."\textsuperscript{63} The activities of Saikiani also made Mr. R. Friel, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to suggest to the Government that Miss. Rajaniprova, a Government Scholarship holder might be warned of cancellation of Scholarship on account of the political activities of her sister, Chandraprova Saikiani. However, the Government rejected the proposal on the ground that Rajaniprova cannot be reasonably held responsible for her sister's action and if any action was necessary, it should be against Chandraprova herself.\textsuperscript{64} Consequently, the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, under Section 144 Cr. P.C. directed Chandraprova to abstain from making speeches in the district of Kamrup for a period of two months from the date of issue of the order to prevent the

\textsuperscript{62} Dipti Sharma, \textit{op.cit.}, p.138
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid}, p.140.
\textsuperscript{64} ASA, Confidential, D.O. No-1338-C, Assam Secretariat, Shillong, June 26, 1930.
disturbance of public tranquility. The order was further forwarded to the S.D.O, Barpeta for information and necessary action should Saikiani visit Barpeta.65

Meanwhile, the A.P.C.C. in its meeting of 12.3.1930 decided to launch a programme of violation of Forest laws as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement. In the Kamrup district, Chandraprova Saikiani was prosecuted under Section 108, Cr.P.C. for delivering seditious speeches in a remote area under some reserved forests. She asked the people to adopt two rules, - anyone who gave evidence against the Congress should be fined Rs.40 and that no forest pass was to be taken out that year. In response to her speeches, the Kachari villagers of North Kamrup defied the Forest laws by killing elephants and also threatened the forest guards when they interfered.66 In December, 1930, Chandraprova Saikiani along with other Congress workers violated the Forest laws in Goalpara district and was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment. Later under the Gandhi – Irwin Pact, she was released on 7 March, 1931. As the political situation deteriorated, the government of Assam by a notification declared the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and the Assam Pradesh Congress Working Committee as unlawful, proclaimed under Section 16 of the Indian Criminal Amendment Act, 1908.67

With the first Round Table Conference being a failure, Lord Irwin the Viceroy of India made an understanding with Gandhi and concluded what is known as the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, 1931. Accordingly, Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience Movement and agreed to attend the Second Round Table

65 ASA, Confidential, D.O. No- 21153-56-C, Shillong, 26th September, 1930.
67 Ibid
Conference. The English in return agreed among others to set free the political
prisoners, though Irwin declined to make any substantial change in the salt laws.

The A.P.C.C. utilized the period of respite afforded by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact to strengthen the organizational base in all parts of the province. A series of 
*Rayat and Rastriya Sammilans* (Conference) were organized to further arouse the consciousness of the masses. Infact, the *Rayat* associations of late had become somewhat political subscribing to the Congress ideals. Sectional conferences of women and students were an integral part of the popular gatherings.68

On 18 April, 1931, the *Naduar Rayat Sabha* in Darrang was attended by about five hundred women. Commenting on the conference, the Chief Secretary of Assam had to agree in one of his confidential reports that “A few years ago it would have been considered incredible that five hundred Assamese ladies should have met in conference with men, and should have passed a resolution applauding the patriotism of Bhagat Singh.” 69 Two days later, i.e. on 20 April, 1931, the Naduar Women’s Conference was held at Biswanath. The meeting was presided over by Guneswari Devi of Nowgong and attended by more than two thousand ladies. Women even from distant villages came to the meeting in hundreds with the tricolor in their hands and sang patriotic songs. Narmada Kumari Devi inaugurated the meeting. Patriots like Dr. Harekrishna Das, Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua, Hemchandra Barua, Omeo Kumar Das, Smti Amalprova Das of Gauhati, Muktabala Baishnavi, Darbai Mech of Nowgong and

Kiranmayee Agarwalla of Tezpur spoke on the occasion. The women resolved to popularize *Khadi* and take initiatives for expansion of women's education.\(^{70}\)

The second Annual Women's Conference was held at Gauripur Maidam, under the presidenship of Srijuta Hemoprova Mazumder. There were about three hundred representatives of all communities. Shree Sila Devi, President of the Reception Committee addressed the representatives in Bengali. She made an appeal to get rid of all kinds of weaknesses and be prepared for sacrifice on behalf of the motherland. Hemoprova Mazumder asked the women to become united under the national flag and work under the leadership of the Congress. She reasoned that women should send their husbands and children to fight for the national cause. The meeting ended by adopting unanimously three resolutions, namely — (1) The prisoners of ordinance and conspiracy cases should be freed immediately and life sentences of Dinesh Gupta and Ramkrishna Gupta (nationalist workers) be commuted (2) the meeting expressed its gratitude and paid homage to those who suffered in course of the Civil Disobedience Movement, and lastly, (3) the meeting desired that constructive works should be started for introducing *swadeshi* goods, popularising spinning and weaving and steps for women and children welfare.\(^{71}\) In the same meeting, Mrs. Nurjahan, a Muslim speaker discussed about the backwardness of the Muslim Community and appealed to the Muslim women to give up *Purdah*.

On 27 April, 1931, a women's meeting held at Meleng near Jorhat under the Presidentship of Usha Devi, had many women speakers like Jayanti Devi, Uma Devi and Satyabati Devi. They all dwelt upon the importance of women in


\(^{71}\) *Ibid*
the freedom movement. One of the speakers, Uma Devi was incidently the wife of the Mouzadar (revenue collector of Chowkhat). Her presence was an inspiration for the village women as Mouzadar’s were usually the supporters of the British rule. 

A martial art training course for girls was organized by the girl students of Goalpara district. The All Dhubri Girls’ student committee of Goalpara in its first annual conference at Dhubri on 30 April, 1931, congratulated the girl students who had undergone sufferings during the non-cooperation and Civil disobedience movement. The meeting emphasized the need to organize physical training for girls. Hemoprova Mazumdar, in her presidential speech appealed to the girl students to adhere to non-violence.

On June 14, 1931, the women of Chariduar in Darrang also had their conference which was presided over by Chandraprova Saikiani. Even the heavy rain could not deter the spirit of the women from attending the meeting. Prominent figures in the meeting were Muktabala Baishnavi, Mahadev Sarma and Lakhidhar Sarma. The Satradhikar (Vaishnavite Saint) of Garamur Satra appreciated the patriotism of the women of Assam and further emphasized upon the need of equality of women with men in every respect.

The year 1931 saw women’s meetings being held throughout the year. Snehalata Barua as President of the Teok Women’s Conference held in August 1931, spoke on the importance of weaving and using Khadi. The Golaghat

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72 Ibid.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid.  
75 Ibid, 21st and 28th June, 1931  
76 Ibid, 23 August, 1931.
Women's conference, 14 August, 1931, also urged upon the women to use *Khadi* alone.

Meanwhile, the national scenerio was disappointing with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact proving to be a hollow promise and Mahatma Gandhi returned from the Second Round Table Conference without any settlement. In 1932, he was arrested soon after his arrival in India and the policy of repression once again showed its ugly head. The second phase of the Civil Disobedient Movement began immediately after his arrest.

Assam responded enthusiastically to protest against the arrest of the national leaders. The Government of Assam struck the first blow in the province by promulgating the Ordinances of Molestation and Boycott of Unlawful Association and Unlawful Instigation. Consequently, the Congress, *Assam Seva Dal, Assam Yuvak Sangha* and similar organizations were declared illegal. The first clash with the government took place when the third Independence Day was celebrated on 26 January, 1932. The people soon after resumed the picketing programme. On 27 January, 1932, the people of Golaghat defied the picketing ordinance by picketing the local shops selling foreign clothes and excisable articles. The lady-pickets too played a leading part. In Golaghat, by 2 February, 1932, of the sixty persons arrested, twenty-four were ladies. A few of the arrested women were Punya Kakati, Guna Borbora, Bina Das, Tagar Das, Aidhani, Makhani Duara, Lakheswari Rajkhowa and others. By 14 February, 1932, eighty persons were arrested in Golaghat of which forty-one were ladies.

Apart from Golaghat, such incidents were reported from almost everywhere in

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77 ASA, Home, Political, File No – 18, 1 January, 1932, F.R. for first half of January 1932.
79 ASA, Home Political File No. 18, 1 January, 1932, F.R. for first half of January, 1932.
the province. At Sibsagar, for instance, Kshirada Chaliha and Kamalaya L. Kakoti had to undergo six months rigorous imprisonment (R.I.)

 Arrest of male members often inspired their female counterparts to come out with greater determination. Kokai Sonowal of Golaghat was sentenced to six months R.I. in January, 1932. His wife with an eighteen month old baby picketed for five consecutive days at Golaghat. She was arrested on every occasion but was let off in the evening as she had the baby with her. On the sixth day, she left the baby in the Congress camp in charge of the Deshasevikas and resumed picketing. She was arrested and sentenced to six months R.I. After a month she was allowed to bring her baby to jail. It was a small but significant instance of the patriotism of women personified by the Sonowal woman.

 In 1932, two women from Golaghat, Madhabi Sonowal, wife of Keshab Sonowal, along with Dharmeswari Gogoi were arrested at Parbatipur while they were on their way to Calcutta to attend the Congress session. Later, Madhabi donated her landed property for the establishment of an ashram.

 Dariki Dasi Barua, a woman martyr of the 1932 movement in Golaghat was pregnant when she was sentenced to six months R.I. and put in Sibsagar Jail. She did not receive any medical treatment in jail, suffered from blood dysentery and had a miscarriage. At last, she was admitted to the Sibsagar Jail hospital where she expired on 26-4-1932. During her ailment, she was asked by the jail authorities to request for a conditional release which she stubbornly refused.

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80 R.E.C.F.F. Assam, Annexure II
81 Dipti Sharma, op.cit, p. 150
82 Anil Kumar Sharma, op.cit, p. 120
The participation of women from the rural areas in Darrang district was noteworthy. In Mangaldoi, Ratnamala Sarma and Tapaswini Sarma were arrested on 24-2-32 and sentenced to three months R.I. for picketing foreign goods shops. On 13-3-32, a procession was taken out in which large numbers of women of Mangaldoi and nearby villages participated. Many processionists like Amba Devi and Golapi Sonowal were arrested and later released.

The Government on its part continued with the repressive measures to cripple the movement. Upto 31 March, 1932, 885 men and 54 women were arrested and a total of 672 men and 42 women were convicted. The Government spread a rumour that lady pickets if they were arrested would be transferred to jails in distant parts of the province. Even ladies with babies did not escape arrests. Excesses were committed even inside the jails. All ‘C’ class prisoners, whether women or young boys were subjected to various types of strenuous jobs like working them at Dheki (rice-husking), Ghani (oil-pressing) and paddy husking. When the women political prisoners refused to take off the ‘Sakhas’ or bangles, their social symbol of marriage, Col. Richie, the Superintendent of Tezpur Jail himself pulled out the bangles by applying soap-water solution. Such was the fate of those who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

On 17 August, 1932, British Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay Macdonald announced the famous Communal Award by which separate electorates were

84 R.E.C.F.F, Assam, 1979, p. 534
85 Dipti Sharma, op.cit, p.154.
86 A.C. Bhuyan, S.De, ed, op.cit, pp 191-192.
87 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
introduced, seats of various communities was fixed, and the depressed classes among the Hindus were given separate representation from those of the Hindus. In protest, Gandhi undertook a fast unto death for revoking the scheme in favour of a common franchise. September 20, 1932, was observed as the day of prayer and fast throughout India. Finally, a settlement, known as the ‘Poona Pact’ was reached between the Congress and the leaders of the depressed classes. It was agreed to have joint electorates. The British Government also amended the Communal Award in the light of the Pact. Henceforth, the Harijan (God’s own man, as Gandhi used to call the depressed classes) issue became an integral part of the Congress movement.

In Assam too, the impact of the Poona Pact was felt with the Congress laying importance on programmes for the removal of untouchability. Ratnamala Devi, in a public meeting at Mangaldoi on 29 September, 1932, spoke on the necessity of abolishing untouchability. Similar meetings and prayers were also held in different places of Assam.\(^91\) It is important to note in this context, that untouchability, however, did not constitute a serious problem in the province, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley when compared to the other parts of India. Community halls and temples were usually open to all except in a few temples, like the Biswanath temple in Darrang, where the lower castes had a limited access. But notwithstanding the facts, when the Harijan issue gained countrywide prominence, Assam too came under its wave.\(^92\)

Gandhi undertook a tour in Assam from 10 April 1934 for collection of funds for Harijan welfare. The people of Assam donated generously. In a

\(^{91}\) Asamiya, 21-10-1932. (Cited from Dipti Sharma, *op.cit, pp.164-165*).

women’s meeting at Barpeta on 11 April, 1934, an amount of Rs.101 and some ornaments were collected and handed over to Gandhi.\textsuperscript{93} During his stay at Jorhat, the Mahatma opened the private temple of Krishnanath Sarma, a Congress leader for the Harijans. Sarma’s mother, Giribala Devi, an orthodox Brahmin widow was herself present at the ceremony. Further, Sarma’s wife Swarnalata Devi, actively participated in organizing the function. For her devotion to Harijan work, she was called the ‘Kasturba’ of Assam.\textsuperscript{94}

The Harijan issue had, however retarded the momentum of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Instead of the ideal of Purna Swaraj heading the list of priorities, the Harijan issue suddenly gained prominence. The waning political fervor of the people was touched upon even by the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division when he commented that “the untouchability campaign is also looked on by nine people out of ten as a mere political stunt.”\textsuperscript{95} Gandhi eventually suspended the Civil Disobedience Movement in May, 1933, though the movement dragged on for yet another year in the form of Individual Satyagraha. Eventually Gandhi retired from active politics by moving out of the orbit of the Congress at its Bombay session held from 26-28 October, 1934. The Congress, of course, did not disassociate from the Mahatma and he continued to be the leader of the struggling nation.

The AICC at its annual session in Bombay in 1935 adopted the Council Entry Programme. The Government of India Act of 1935 further gave provincial autonomy to India. Inspite, of dissatisfaction over the Act, all political parties decided to participate in the election to the provincial legislature. Assam was to

\textsuperscript{93} Asamiya, 21-4-34, (Cited from Dipti Sharma, op.cit, pp.166-167).
\textsuperscript{94} Krishnanath Sarma, \textit{op.cit}, pp.227-231.
\textsuperscript{95} A.C. Bhuyan, S.De, ed., \textit{op.cit}, p.198.
have a bicameral legislature and for the purpose of conducting the election in Assam, the Assam Provincial Congress Parliamentary Board was constituted. The election campaigns saw much enthusiasm in Assam. Appeals to vote in favour of the Congress and signed by both men and women were published in the *Asamiya*, a weekly newspaper in Assamese. Some of the women signatories were Nagabala Borbora, Kamaleswari Barua, Lakhimipriya Dutta and Kamaleswari Durrani.96 The A.P.C.C, however, did not nominate Chandraprova Saikiani who was willing to contest the election on the ground that she might not win the seat. It was indeed a manifestation of male chauvinism.

The general election throughout the country was held on February, 1937. The results affirmed Congress popularity among the people. In Assam, out of 108 seats, the Congress captured 33 seats. Out of 29 Congress candidates who contested from the Brahmaputra Valley, 26 came out successful; and out of 12 Congress candidates of the Surma Valley, 7 got elected. The Congress candidates had the advantage of an older and better organization of which they made full use.97

Though, women’s right to vote was granted about a decade back they found no occasion to exercise it. But the election offered thousands of women to register their names as voters. It further aroused women’s political consciousness. The Act of 1935 gave women an opportunity to be elected to the provincial legislatures. In Assam, Miss Down (independent) was elected to the legislative Assembly and Zubida Ataur Rahman (nominated) became Deputy President of

96 Dipiti Sharma, *op.cit*, p.179
the newly constituted Assam Legislative Council.98 However, no woman was elected to the Assembly from the Brahmaputra Valley. Padmakumari Gohain, in the annual conference of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti held on 20 November, 1937, urged upon the Assam Legislative Assembly to implement the Bill that granted women the right to be elected as municipal commissioners.99

Although the Congress was the single largest party in the Assembly of the province, it could not command enough majority to form the government. The reluctance of the Congress to form the ministry led to the formation of a United Muslim Party coalition ministry in Assam under Syed Md. Sadullah on 1 April, 1937. However, the new ministry was so unpopular, that it was forced to resign on 13 September, 1938.100 Subsequentaly, a second coalition ministry was formed in Assam under Gopinath Bordoloi on 20 September, 1938.

Meetings were held all over the province to express support and solidarity to the new ministry. Apart from attending the general meetings, women held separate meetings to rejoice the formation of the new ministry. On 25 September, 1938, the women of Charing in a meeting held under the Presidentship of Sundaribala Kakati, extended support to the newly formed Congress ministry. Further, the Gauhati Mahila Samiti through a resolution requested Miss Down, an independent member in the Assembly to cooperate with the Congress.101

Apart from being participants in the political activities of the period, a few women of Assam also participated in certain national level conferences. Swarnalata Barua of Golaghat as a delegate of the Assam team attended the fifty-

98 A.C. Bhuyan, S.DC., op.cit.p340
99 Tmidiniya Asamiya, 11 December, 1937
101 Dipti Sharma, op.cit., p.188
first session of the Congress at Haripur in 1938. Hemoprova Das along with her two daughters Amalprova and Tilottoma went to Gujrat to attend the Congress session. These are indications that women of Assam had come a long way from being confined within the home spaces to their active participation in affairs which clearly lie outside their traditional social periphery.

Meanwhile the Second World Was broke out in 1939 and India was declared a belligerent without any consultation with the Indians. In protest, the Congress ministers resigned. The Bordoloi ministry too tendered its resignation on 15 November, 1939. The Congress demanded complete independence. Gandhi once again launched his campaign of resistance which included Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience and called upon the people “to refrain from assisting the British war efforts”\footnote{R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol III, Calcutta, 1963, pp.605-609}. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1940-41 was not launched as a mass campaign. In Assam, the *Individual Satyagraha*, launched on 11 December, 1940 was participated by twentysix *Satyagrahis*, all of whom were arrested, imprisoned and fined for shouting anti-war slogans in front of Government offices.\footnote{A.C. Bhuyan, S.De, ed. *Political History of Assam*, Vol. Ill, Dispur, Gauhati, 1980, p.27}

Due to the absence of approval for women to become *Satyagrahis*, women of Assam could not participate in the first and second phase of the *Individual Satyagraha*.s But in the third phase which began from the middle of April, 1941, \footnote{Ibid.} the *Satyagraha* was open to all primary members of the Congress. For the third phase, Gandhi approved the names of Seven hundred fifty seven *Satyagrahis* of the province of which twenty-two were women.\footnote{Dipti Sharma, *op.cit.*, p.203} With

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104 Ibid.
105 Dipti Sharma, *op.cit.*, p.203
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regard to women, Gandhi instructed on 31 December, 1940, at Bombay, that no women with babies of eighteen months of age and below should participate in the *Satyagraha*.\(^{106}\)

Swamalata Barua, wife of Rajendra Nath Sarma of Golaghat, along with two other women volunteers became the first women of the Brahmaputra Valley to court arrest and undergo rigorous imprisonment (R.I.) of one month for offering *Satyagraha* in 1941.\(^{107}\)

Amalprova Das, daughter of Dr. Harekrisha Das of Panbazar, Gauhati, was arrested on the 4 of March, 1941 for offering *Satyagraha* at Amla Village under Chaigaon police station. On 7 March, 1941, she was convicted and sentenced to six weeks simple imprisonment and fined rupees twenty-five. She was soon transferred to Jorhat Jail from where she was subsequently released on 17 April, 1941.\(^{108}\) After her release, Amalprova Das devoted herself more to organizational work. On 25-5-41, a women’s meeting was held at Sarbhog under the presidenship of Amalprova Das. Sjt. Hareswar Das, a retired Civil Surgeon, Chandraprova Saikiani, Akshoy Kumar Das, Bangshidhar Choudhury among others attended the meeting. The meeting primarily discussed the duties of women in the present context of the country. Besides, one Mule Dashi_of Amguri, Sarbhog, delivered a fiery speech to urge women to take up spinning and help the Congress.\(^{109}\) Amalaprova along with Puuspalata Das also attended on 4 August, 1941, a public meeting at Itakhola of Charigaon, Jorhat, to open a

\(^{106}\) *Ibid*, pp.203-204  
\(^{109}\) A.S.A., File No-162, 1941, Confidential F.R. for Barpeta sub-division, 3-6-41
Satyagrahi camp for training the Satyagrahis to propagate the Congress ideals amongst the masses. In another women’s meeting at Noapara, they asked the people to join the freedom movement in a more organized manner and in greater numbers.\textsuperscript{110}

Puspalata Saikia (later Das) was released with a warning by the Deputy Commissioner on 21 March, 1941, for offering Satyagraha at Haremudoi School field under Palasbari police station on 20 February 1941.\textsuperscript{111} Premalata Bharali, the Secretary of the Morigaon Mahila Congress in 1940 also offered Satyagraha and was sentenced to one day imprisonment.\textsuperscript{112} Dudhalata Dutta, an active Congress worker resigned as a M.V. School teacher in 1941 to offer Satyagraha, She too was imprisoned for one day.\textsuperscript{113}

Besides, there were a few other women who offered Satyagraha, like Panduriya Devi at Goalpara; Sudhalata Saikia, Devajani Baruah, Aideubala Barua, Patali Sonowalani at Jorhat ; Madhabi Sonowalani at Golaghat ; Dobhagi Devi at Mangoadoi, and Kususn Kumari Deka at Tihu and Haribhanga respectively. Guneswari Devi, one of the most active women freedom fighters of Nowgong was however, not allowed by Gandhi to offer Satyagraha because of poor health.\textsuperscript{114}

It was probably beyond the comprehension of the ruling authorities that the Individual Satyagraha launched in 1940-41 would just after a year assume

\textsuperscript{110} ASA, Confidential Report for week ending 16 August, 1941, No-1302-4/C Kamrup. H.F.M. records.

\textsuperscript{111} ASA, Confidential Monthly Report for the month ending 31\textsuperscript{st} March, 1941, No-646-47/C of 5.4.41, H.F.M. records.

\textsuperscript{112} R.E.C.F.F., Assam

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{114} Tinidiniya Asamiya, 7 Feb., 1941.

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stormy proportions. The success of the Satyagraha in Assam in arousing the masses was because it was carried out in an organized manner. Training camps were organized at Hajo, Goalpara, Barpeta, Gauhati, Jorhat, Golaghat, Mangaldoi etc in which a large member of women also participated.

The women Satyagrahis involved themselves in the collection of Satyagraha funds and enrollment of volunteers. Chandraprova Saikiani under Patacharkuchi Police station, Hemoprova Bora, Amalprova Das and Suryabala Choudharini of Gauhati, besides others, were reported to be engaged in collection of funds. In the year 1940, the women organizers of Assam made extensive tours throughout the Brahmaputra Valley to popularize among women the programme of Satyagraha and its significance. And by the end of 1940, the total number of Satyagrahis from Goalpara, Gauhati, Mangaldoi, Dibrugarh Jorhat, Tezpur, Sibsagar, Golaghat and Nowgong rose to 33,082, including 1192 women Satyagrahis among them. The popularity of the Satyagraha movement made the government to issue extemment notices on Congress workers. Consequently, on 2 September, 1940, in a meeting at Curzon Hall, Puspalata Saikia along with Debakanta Barua, Sreeman Prafulla Goswami and Ramesh Sarma protested against the order of the Assam Government regarding the extemment of Congress workers from Assam.

The growing involvement of women in the freedom movement had been recognised by the national leaders. The Congress Working Committee (C.W.C) in April, 1940, decided to open a women’s wing of the Congress at the national and

\[115\] Puspalata Das, 'Women Satyagrahis and the Quit India Movement' in A.C. Bhuyan, S. De, ed., op.cit, pp-21-22
\[116\] ASA, Confidential weekly Report, File No. 19, 1940, Barpeta 1940-42.
\[117\] Dipti Sharma, op. cit, p. 135
\[118\] A.S.A., File No.: 66/1940, F.R. for 1940

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provincial levels. Accordingly, the women’s wing in Assam was opened in September, 1940, with Puspalata and Amalprova Das as joint secretaries. The opening of the women’s wing was an important step in drawing more women to the Congress fold.

The ‘National Week’ was observed from 6 April to 13 April, 1941, at the initiative of Gandhi. As elsewhere, Assam too observed the week with much enthusiasm Relevant issues like importance of constructive programme, maintenance of communal harmony, eradication of untouchability and opium eating were mainly discussed in meetings held during the week. Political conferences, industrial exhibitions, spinning competitions, seminars etc were also organized for the purpose. Women’s meetings were held throughout the Brahmaputra Valley to celebrate the week.120

Further, the Independence Day for 1941 was also celebrated spontaneously by the people of the province. The day was celebrated as the day of fraternization, abolition of untouchability, giving up of intoxicants, spinning and promotion of Swadeshi. Women leaders hoisted the National Flag at many places, and among the names included, were of Labonyat Baruah, President of the Golaghat women’s wing of the Congress, Pandupriya Patgiri at Goalpara and Annada Devi Borkotoky, Secretary of the Baligaon Congress Committee at Jorhat. Women’s meetings took place in the villages and in many cases at the initiative of Amalprova Das and Chandraprova Saikiani. In a meeting held at Helona village near Patacharkuchi on 4 February, 1941, the women, apart from

119 The Assam Tribune, 25th April, 1941
120 Anil Kumar Sharma, op.cit, p. 35
121 Assam Tribune, 12th January, 1941
122 Dipti Sharma, op.cit, p. 214
vowing to spin and weave for themselves also decided to discard the viel (orani, which partially covered their face) as a step for upliftment of women. Thus, it is evident that the attitudes and activities of women during the course of the nationalist struggle had contributed much in changing the face of the Assamese women.

During the period, The All Assam Girl Students Committee (AAGSC) was formed at Shillong. The AAGSC was to serve as a separate platform for the girl students to take part in the realization of the ideal of freedom, peace and progress of the country. Lila Barua of AAGSC commenting on its objectives said, “It is nothing less than to make the womenfolk conscious of their rights and responsibilities to the nation. It is the time for us to work and grasp the urgency of the situation, to realize the immediate need of adequate and equal cooperation and comradeship in guiding, moulding, sustaining and achieving those lofty and patriotic ideals that thrill the heart of every generation and in the fulfillment of which lies the noblest destiny of man”. Further, Puspalata Das as president of the AAGSC meeting at Shillong in September, 1941, asked the girl students to uphold national interests and work for communal harmony.

Meanwhile, the War progressed and approached towards the very gates of India. The third Sadullah ministry in Assam displayed keenness to help the British Government in its war efforts. Apart from contributing a sum of one lakh rupees to the war fund, it also made the people to contribute towards the

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123 Ibid, p.125
125 Assam Tribune, 19 September, 1941
126 A.Guha, op.cit., pp. 164-165.
It was reported in the Asamiya that the issue did not escape the notice of the Congress Working Committee, who expressed resentment against the high-handedness of the Government officials and directed the people to resist it. As a result, the contributions to the war-fund declined. Meetings were also held at several places to protest against the collection of war-funds.

The War together with the Congress movement in India made the British Government assume a conciliatory attitude. However, the failure of the Cripps Mission together with the prospect of a Japanese attack on India made the Congress Working Committee to adopt at Wardha on 14 July, 1941, the ‘Quit India’ Resolution demanding immediate withdrawal of British rule over India. As the movement was bound to hit the interests of the English and hinder their war preparations, a large number of Congress leaders including Gandhi was arrested and the Congress Party declared illegal.

In Assam, the people responded enthusiastically to the Quit India movement. The government on its part arrested Congress leaders, namely, Md. Tayyebullah, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bordoloi, Sidhinath Sarma, Omeo Kumar Das etc. Thereafter, the government through a Gazette Notification declared the APCC, the D C C’s subsidiary committees, the Santi Sena etc. as unlawful bodies.
The arrest of the Congress leaders was followed by huge processions, *hartals*, organized spontaneously in different places of Assam. Assam did not lag behind Bihar, United Provinces and Bombay in the historic struggle of 1942. The women of Assam too played a memorable role in the Quit India Movement. Many women enrolled themselves as *Santi Sena* members. Amalprova Das, Puspalata Das, Chandraprova Saikiani were thoroughly engaged in the organizational work of the Congress during the period. Chandraprova Saikiani, who was then active at Pathsala tried to organize a meeting at Jalikata village in Barpeta. The arrival of the police prevented her from holding any meeting. However, some forty female workers met at *Jalikata Kirtan Ghar* with usual slogans and flags in hand. The police party snatched away the flags and dispersed them.

Hemoprova Das went to Barpeta with Chandraprova Saikiani and called a secret women’s meeting. A partial *Hartal* was observed in Barpeta town to observe ‘Anti-Imperialism Day’

The mass arrest of Congress workers resulted in many Congress leaders going underground. As Puspalata Das preferred to work openly, she was entrusted to hold meeting and explain the decisions of the Tezpur Unit of the Congress. On 12 September, 1942, Puspalata Das while presiding over a Congress meeting at Borgaon under Dhekiajuli Police Station attended by about

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135 *Ibid*.
three hundred persons, asked the people to organize peaceful processions to the police stations and hoist the National Flag. On 20 September, 1942, she appealed to the government servants to resign from their jobs. Again, in a meeting at Baralimari village on 17 September, 1942, she called upon the villagers to carry on the mass movement.\textsuperscript{138}

In Darrang, the \textit{Satyagrahis} were divided into two groups – the \textit{Santi Bahini} and \textit{Mrityu Bahini} or death Squad. \textit{Santi Bahini} would work to maintain peace, the \textit{Mrityu Bahini} would prepare themselves to face death if death comes while hoisting the National Flag in the police stations, considered then as the symbol of power.\textsuperscript{139} The membership of both the \textit{bahinies} was conditional. In \textit{Santi Bahini}, persons of the age group between 18 years to 60 years could become members, but in \textit{Mrityu Bahini}, it must be between 18 years to 50 years.\textsuperscript{140}

The spontaneous participation of people made the government nervous. Firing was widely resorted to in Nowgong, Tezpur, Goalpara and Barpeta subdivisions. What was more painful was that women, and in one case a young girl and in another a pregnant women were deliberately fired at. On 20 September, 1942, Kanaklata Barua, a young eighteen years old girl, leading around 5,000 people proceeded to hoist the flag at Gohpur police station. When stopped by the officer-in-charge of the police station, she said. "I will do my duty (meaning I will hoist the flag, cost what it may), you do your duty."\textsuperscript{141} She was shot dead from point blank range and right on the chest for her audacity to advance and

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid
\textsuperscript{139} Puspatala Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p.149
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} A.S.A., APCC report on the atrocities committed in 1942.
hoist the flag. Many more rounds were fired killing Mukunda Kakoti who attempted to hoist the flag after Kanaklata. Kanaklata became a martyr and her sacrifice became a source of inspiration for many. She symbolized the spirit of sacrifice and patriotism of Assamese womanhood. Apart from Kanaklata, there were other women Satyahrahis who suffered bullet wounds at the Gohpur firing. They were Moni Kachari, Smti Bhogi Nath, Smti Kolidoi Nath and Dariki Nath. There were of course many more women in the same procession and in other places of the province.

Meanwhile, Puspalata Das proceeded via Tezpur to Dhekiajuli to lead the procession there. However, in Tezpur, she along with Janeswar Missir and Mia Singh Punjabi of Tezpur town were arrested under the Defence of India rule (D.I.R.)143. She was treated as a security prisoner in Tezpur Jail. Afterwards, she was transferred to Jorhat Jail along with Omeo Kumar Das and Mahadev Sarma. Since then there was no separate Jail for the female prisoners.144

Women were ruthlessly attacked and assaulted for taking part in processions. Even pregnant women and women in their monthly course did not escape police violence. Joshoda Keotani, Sumali Handique, the wife of Sri Boloram Sarmah of Bebejia and Sjta. Anna Barua of Golaghat were only a few examples of the victims of police excesses. Women who received serious injuries were Budheswari, Nandeswari, Hameswari Phukan, Leela Neogani, Holeswari Sutia, all of North Lakhimpur; Rohini Debi, wife of Tankeswari Bora of

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142 RECFF, Annexure I
D.I.R., By rule 56 of the Defence of India Rules, no public procession, meetings or assembly should be held and no person shall take part in such procession unless permission was given by the District Magistrate. (A.S.A., File No-56, F.R. for 1941-42)
144 Dipti Sharma, op.cit., pp. 238-239.
Nowgong; Ratneswari and Nanibala Saikia, Magiram Bora’s daughters and daughter -in-law of Golaghat; wives of Darjeeram and Taneram Saikia, Someswari Kachari and wife of Benudhar Hazarika of Tezpur; Chandraprova Saikiani and Bhubeneswari Debi of Bajali, Barpeta sub-division. The number would have gone up further, had all the victims given evidence about the atrocities committed on them.145

Students who took part in the 1942 movement also did not escape police atrocities. In Sibasagar alone, girl students like Kalapana Barua, Lili Bora, Bijoya Hazarika and others received Lathi blows146

North Lakhimpur witnessed huge and frequent processions from September to October, 1942. The flag bearers were mostly women, who were assaulted and insulted by police. Budheswari, Nandeswari and Hemeswari Phukan were only a few of the women who faced police cruelty. On 14 September, 1942, a procession at Bihpuria was lathi-charged. About a dozen persons received serious injuries – Lakheswari Chutia who was the flag-bearer of the procession was knocked down by the butt end of the rifle and her flag was forcibly taken away.147 Leela Neogani of village Kachikota received similar treatment and died within two months of the incident. On 7 October, 1942, a procession proceeding towards Dholpur was also lathicharged. A pregnant Sumala Handique, who was also in the procession received kicks from the police and consequently delivered a dead child.148

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
In Dhekiajuli too, the police fired upon peaceful processionists, killing more than a dozen. Among the women martyrs were Tileswari Barua, Kumali Devi, Kahuli and Padumi Nath.149

Nowgong was at the forefront of the Quit India Movement. It retained its earlier reputation of being the most active district in promoting the cause of the nation. In Nowgong alone, activities ranging from non-violent non-cooperation to uprooting of railway lines, destroying bridges etc were resorted to.150 The police and the military let loose a reign of terror during the night at places like Barapujia, Bebejia and Barhampur. On 28 August, 1942, when some young men came near the Bebejia bridge at night, the military police who were hiding under the bridge, started firing on them, killing two persons and injuring six other.151 The police thereafter ransacked Bebejia village and arrested about 400 persons, which included the mother of a new baby of three days.

In Jongalbalahu near Raha, a similar violence was reported near the Jongalbalahugarg Bridge with the result that two young men were killed.152

In Barapujia, Tilok Deka, a member of the Santi Sena, who was guarding the village on the night of 27 August, 1942, blew the horn at the sight of the military patrol party to warm the villagers. He was shot dead and the sleeping men and women were dragged out and mercilessly beaten.153

In Nowgong, till September, 1942, five freedom fighters laid down their lives, namely Kolai Koch, Hemram Bora, Hemram Patar, Gunabhiram Bardoloi

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149 RECFF, Annexure I
151 Gazetteer of India, Assam State, Nowgong District, Gauhati, 1978, p. 78
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
and Tilak Deka. The 16th of September, 1942, was observed *Panchabir Divas* (a day in honour of the five martyrs). Public meetings and prayer meeting were held at various places. Imbued with a new spirit, the *Santi Senas* succeeded in recapturing some of their camps earlier seized by the authorities. It was to celebrate the recapture of the *Santi-Sena* camp at Barhampur that people met for a community feast and a public meeting on 18 September. The police and the military arrived on the scene and tried to snatch away the tricolor from the hands of Ratnabala Phukan, a young girl of fifteen years. Her aged mother, Bhogeswari Phukanani intervened and there ensued a scuffle, which ended in a shooting spree killing Bhogeswari along with four others on the spot, besides wounding several others.  

The women of Sibsagar also participated regularly in the processions and meetings of the '42 movement. The police in their effort to crush the movement did not spare even the women and children. Sjta. Ratneswari and Nanibala Saikia, Umakanti Rai Barua were only a few of the women who were injured due to police excesses. Srimati Belia Chutia of Deopanigaon was taken away by some military men perhaps with evil intentions. She was however rescued.

There were also a handful of women who involved themselves in different types of activities and a few of them worked underground. Annaprova Barua, wife of Sankar Chandra Barua, the underground worker of Golaghat, was one of the most important women workers. She was in-charge of the Congress Volunteer camps at Golaghat. The police having failed to arrest her husband subjected Annaprova to much harassment. All her possessions and belongings

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154 Anuradha Dutta, *op. cit*, p. 272
155 *Gazetteer of India, op.cit, pp. 78-79.*
156 A.S.A., APCC report on the atrocities committed in 1942

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including the image of the diety were taken away.\(^{157}\) She was neither imprisoned nor arrested, but she contributed in a great way to the movement by sacrificing the comforts and family obligations.

Police atrocities along with the arrest of Congress workers found expressions in *hartals* and peaceful processions. Bajali, near Barpeta in Kamrup district, observed the ‘Nowgong Martyrs Day’ on 25 September, 1942, where thousands of men and women took part. The women of the area were greatly inspired by the path shown by Chandraprova Saikiani. The latter like many other Congress leaders also decided to work underground.\(^{158}\) She reportedly tried to form a female volunteer corps at Pathsala.\(^{159}\) In a government report, it was alleged that Congress leader Dharanidhar Das along with Chandraprova Saikiani, through their speeches in a public meeting at Patacharkuchi on 26 April, 1944, instigated the people to get hold of the salt in possession of unlicensed black marketeers. Subsequently, two dacoity cases were reported from the area in the last part of April, 1944.\(^{160}\) The police intention was to implicate Saikiani with the dacoity case.

Women of Assam also engaged themselves in the programme of stoppage of supplies to the army. Puspalata Das formed a party of women volunteers for picketing and obstructing the movement of goods to military stores.\(^{161}\) In fact, a group of twelve females unsuccessfully attempted to stop the transport of P.W.D. gravels by carts between Sarupeta and Pathsala when police arrived and dispersed

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\(^{158}\) Dipti Sharma, *op. cit.* p. 269


\(^{160}\) A.S.A., APAI, No.-1222, Kamrup, 13-5-1944

them. The underground movement became an important feature of the August struggle. Students took an active part with ladies also joining them. Infact, ladies became so emboldened that they even dared capture the court for one day. Snehalata Devi occupied the judge’s seat and resorted to picketing so as to prevent the real judge from entering the court.

As elsewhere, the ‘Anti-Imperialist Day’ was observed in Assam on 4, 5, and 6 January, 1943 with large scale participation of women. To commemorate the Day, strikes were observed on 4 and 5 January at the initiative of the women of Barpeta and Pathsala.

The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup in January, 1943, issued an internment order against four women leaders, namely, Hemoprova Das, Amalprova Das, Saruplata Choudhury and Chandraprova Saikiani. Amalprova Das was arrested on 27 January under D.I.R for refusal to accept the internment order while Chandraprova was arrested at Pathsala on 26 January.

Apart from participating in processions, meetings and hartals, the women of Assam also contributed in many other ways. As almost all letters were censored during the 1942-44 period, the underground movement communication network was operated through trusted couriers which also included selected girls like Sudhalata Dutta and Rebati Lahon. Again, giving shelter to underground

163 Anuradha Dutta, op. cit. p. 274
165 A.S.A. APAI, No-190, Kamrup, 30-1-43, H.F.M. records.
166 Dipti Sharma, op.cit p. 272
or absconding Congress workers was another great risk that the women undertook.\textsuperscript{167}

The women of Assam generally adhered to the non-violent movement of Gandhi. However, a few of them who became disillusioned at the pace of progress of the movement were drawn towards violent activities. A few prominent underground female workers were Gunawati Devi and Rakhada Devi of Bajali, Joimati Saikia, Enamai Bora, Kali Saikia, Punima Saikia, Bajuli Bora, Daibaki Das of Nowgong, Dudheswari Hazarika of North Lakhimpur; Aikan Bhuyan of Teok, Kunjalata Gogoi of Sibsagar; Basanti Bordoloi of Jorhat; Annaprova Barua and Padmawati Rajkumari of Golaghat and many more.\textsuperscript{168} When Mahendra Hazarika of Nowgong formed the \textit{Mrityu Bahini} (death squad) to effectively carry out subversive activities, Ratnamala Phukan, Damayanti Bora along with a few others became its members. They engaged in activities such as destruction of bridges, railway tracts etc.

Gandhi’s twenty-one day epic fast in February, 1943 and his disapproval of violent activities led to a split in the camp of the underground leaders with one section eager to give up the path of violence. In a secret meeting at Panigaon (Nowgong) in December, 1942, under the Presidenship of Amalprova Das, Lakhimiprasad Goswami openly deprecated terrorism and condemned the theft of guns.\textsuperscript{169} Goswami was condemned by Mahendra Hazarika, but with the latter’s arrest on 15 February, 1943, the underground movement gradually fizzled out.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid}, and also readings of newspapers, books etc.
\textsuperscript{169} A.C. Bhuyan, S.De, eds., \textit{op. cit.}, p.94
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid}, p. 133
The August movement in Assam as elsewhere was officially ‘contained’ through atrocities and repressive measures which also included detention of political leaders, volunteers and suspects. The 1942 movement in Assam proved to be the longest phase of the freedom struggle in the province in which many men and women became martyrs. Although the Quit India Movement failed in its immediate purpose of making the British to quit India, “the British realized in their heart of hearts, that their time for quitting the sub-continent was fast approaching, and that the tumult and fury that was stirring the vast humanity of Indians would gradually shape into a luminous efflorescence of freedom.”

Meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi launched a scheme of constructive programme, which he viewed as essential to achieve independence. The programme included among others, items like communal unity, removal of untouchability, sanitation, improvement of village industries, upliftment of women, promotion of Khadi etc. The contribution of the Assamese women towards the promotion of Khadi was significant as had already been mentioned. Women also contributed much in the promotion of communal harmony. To cite an example, Kalyani Dutta, a woman worker of Goalpara district went to Noakhali to work for Hindu-Muslim unity as instructed by Gandhi. Amalprova Das also went there in 1946 and worked for three months for the same cause.

On 22 February, 1944, Kasturba Gandhi expired and a fund was created after her name, the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (K.G.N.M.T.) to be utilized for the welfare of women and children. A fund collection committee was formed in Assam with Amalprova Das and Gopinath Bordoloi as joint

\[\text{\cite{171} Ibid, p. 133}\]
\[\text{\cite{172} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\cite{173} Ibid.}\]
Meetings were held throughout the Brahmaputra Valley at the behest of the Congress leaders, to encourage the people towards constructive works. The women of Nowgong in a meeting on 7 April, 1945, under the Presidenship of Padmawati Hazarika, and the Convention of the Upper Assam Women’s Association held near Golaghat on 9 May, 1945, under the Presidenship of Sudhalata Dutta, decided on the expansion of women’s education. Further, Amalprava Das was able to get the approval of Gandhi for a scheme aimed at upliftment of indigenous industries of Assam like *Pat, Muga* and *Endi* in collaboration with the KGNMT. By her devotion and sincerity, she was able to start the Trust Work in Assam for which she had to undergo training in Basic Education at Wardha.

The KGNMT was formally started in Assam from 9 January, 1946, with the inauguration of the *Gram Sevika Vidyalaya* at Sarania in Gauhati by Gandhi. The *Gram Sevika Vidyalaya* popularly known as the *Sarania Ashram* was started with only seven girl students. The KGNMT appointed Amalaperva as the ‘Pratinidhi’. Girls from different communities of Assam formed the first batch of trainees. Puspalata Das, presiding over a meeting to felicitate the trainees on successful completion of the course, urged them to utilize their knowledge to

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175 *Sadiniya Asamiya, 26-5-1945*
176 *Dipti Sharma, op.cit. p.304*
177 *Ibid, p. 303*
build up self-reliant villages and to prove themselves in the field of constructive work.\textsuperscript{178}

In 1945, the Second World War concluded in favour of the English. Around the same time, the Labour Party which was sympathetic to the Indian cause came to power in England (1945). The new British Government proposed election to the central and provincial legislatures towards the close of 1945. The A.I.C.C. decided to contest the elections to demonstrate the will of the people on the issue of immediate transfer of power.

Assam, like the rest of the country geared up to participate in the elections. The women, especially of the Brahmaputra Valley were inclined towards the Congress Party. The special session of the Executive Committee of the \textit{Assam Mahila Samiti} on 4 May, 1945, resolved to :- (a) reorganize and project the women of Assam as a united force, (b) demand women’s right to participate in local Government institutions; (c) send women’s representative to all municipal boards of Assam in the next municipal election and (d) to demand inclusion of all qualified women in the voters list.\textsuperscript{179} The meeting also decided to form a \textit{Mahila Dal} (women’s front) to fight the ensuing elections and to send the names of at least one women candidate from each district.\textsuperscript{180} However, the \textit{Mahila Dal} did not figure separately, when the Congress Party nominated one women candidate to the Assembly.

In the elections, the Congress emerged as the single largest Party with a clear majority. The lone women Congress Candidate had also won. On 11\textsuperscript{th} May, 31, 1947. \textit{Asamiya}, p.307. \textit{Ibid.}
February, 1946, Gopinath Bordoloi formed the Government in Assam by constituting his seven member cabinet.\footnote{A.C.Bhuyan, S.De. ed., op.cit., pp., 333-336.}

On 23 March, 1946, the Cripps Mission arrived in India to set up a Constitution making body and to establish a full self-government in India.\footnote{Tara Chand, op.cit, Vol.IV, p. 463} However, its consultations with the Indian leaders failed as it could not arrive at a unanimous decision to break the political deadlock. As such, the Cabinet Mission put forward its own Plan. British India was divided into three groups – A, B, and C. Assam and Bengal were tagged together in group C.

The Cabinet Mission Plan gave rise to grave apprehension in Assam. She was denied provincial status, which in turn would wipe out her culture and identity.\footnote{A.C. Bhuyan, S. De, ed., op.cit., p. 345.} On the very day of the announcement of the Plan, i.e, on 16 May, 1946, the A.P.C.C. sent a telegraphic message to the Congress President, Abul Kalam Azad and other C.W.C. members, intimating the deep resentment of Assam and their opposition and rejection of the Grouping clauses.\footnote{Anuradha Dutta, op.cit, p.296} The ‘anti-grouping week’ was observed from 1 June to 7 June, with numerous protest meetings and demonstrations.\footnote{Asamiya, 1June, 1946.}

The women of Assam did not lag behind in denouncing the grouping proposal. The \textit{Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti} (A.P.M.S.) organized separate women’s meetings and demonstrations at several place of the province. Prominent women leaders like Puspalata Das, Amalprova Das, Padmakumari Gohain and others discussed the danger posed by the Grouping Scheme upon...
Assam and appealed to the masses to strongly oppose it. Each of these meetings was attended by thousands of women.

The executive committee of the A.P.M.S. sent telegraphic message to Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Acharya Kripalani and Sardar Patel on 13 December expressing their strong opposition to the grouping clause and their decision not to abide by the decision of the Federal Court. The Samiti also requested national women leaders like Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Purnima Banerjee and Sucheta Kripalani to help out Assam.186 A group of the Congress leadership which also included Puspalata Das visited Calcutta and Patna enroute to Delhi to reiterate Assam’s opposition to the grouping clause.187

The role played by the national newspapers on the Assam question, left much to be desired. As such, some Assamese residents of Calcutta formed an association named ‘Asom Sangha’ under the presidentship of Nalinibala Devi to organize anti-grouping campaign outside Assam, especially in Bengal. The Sangha even submitted a memorandum to the Bengal Legislative Council pleading not to support the Grouping scheme.188 Nalinibala Devi played an amazing role in arousing the people against the grouping proposal. Gandhi assured Nalinibala of his support to the Assam cause when the latter met him at Sodepur Ashram in Calcutta in 1946.189

With Assam surrounded by uncertainties and tension over the grouping proposal, political events in India took a new course. The Muslim League refused to join the Constituent Assembly as the rift between the Congress and the Muslim

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186 Dipti Sharma, op.cit., pp.312-313.
188 Asamiya, 10th August, 1946
League further widened. A state of general disquiet, uncertainty and unrest starred the country. It made the British Prime Minister, Atlee to make a declaration on 20 February, 1947, that power would be transferred to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948. Earl Mountbatten, the Viceroy of India was convinced of the unworkability of the Cabinet Mission Plan and instead conceded to the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan by deciding on the partition of the country. With the acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan by both the Congress and the Muslim League, the anti-grouping movement also came to an end. The British domination over India also finally came to an end on 15 August, 1947, with the passing of the India Independence Act of July, 1947.

Freedom was thus achieved, though it came with the price of partition. It was Assam’s tenacious opposition which also included the contribution of thousands of its womenfolk that the grouping scheme could not be implemented. Assam was thus saved for India, as it emerged through the chaos and confusion of the time.

At the end, it could be said with conviction that the history of the struggle for India’s freedom is a saga of joint endeavour of both men and women, to which Assam was no exception. In praise of the hard work done by the thousands of nationalists a Resolution of Remembrance at the instance of Pandit Motilal Nehru was passed on 26 January, 1941 and hundreds of public meeting were called for the purpose all over India, despite the Government order prohibiting

\[^{190}\text{A.C. Bhuyan, S.De. ed., op.cit., pp.388-389.}\]
such meetings. The following passage of the Resolution relates to women of India.\textsuperscript{191}

We record our homage and deep admiration for the womanhood of India, who, in the hour of peril for the motherland, left the shelter of their homes and with unfailing courage and endurance fought shoulder to shoulder with their men folk in the frontline of India’s national army to share with them the sacrifices and triumphs of the struggle.

The mass participation of women of Assam in the Freedom struggle stood in sharp contrast to the nineteenth century state polity, when female participation was restricted to the members of the royal and noble families and that too only on a few limited occasions. The contemporary social condition did not permit the emergence of women as a socio-political force. It was only with the formation of the \textit{Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti} in 1915, that organized movement for women participation in the socio-political life began in the Brahmaputra Valley districts of Assam.

The 1920s were a watershed for women’s participation in the Congress led nationalist movement in India. The emergence of Gandhi in the political scene of India, coupled with his political language brought about a steady reconciliation of domestic and public values. His ideology of non-violence encouraged women to join the movement for they amply possessed the qualities needed for a non-violent struggle, viz, tolerance, courage and capacity to suffer. Further, the non-violent feature ensured women’s equal participation. Under such propositions, the visit of Gandhi to Assam in 1921 acted as a propeller in drawing women to the nationalist cause. As women were only gradually coming out of

\textsuperscript{191} Varalakshmi Janapathy, \textit{Indian Women through the Ages}, N-Delhi, 2002, p.196
their cocoons, their participation in the 1921 movement was limited and elitist in character. Mostly, those women participated whose male family members had already joined the movement. The names of Bidyut Prova Devi, Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi, Dharmada Devi, and a few others may be cited in this context. Hence, the nationalist character of the family was clearly influential so far as participation of women was concerned.

The elite women’s participation was facilitated by several factors. First, they were mostly educated and came from households that were already politically active. Second, their families encouraged and supported them to participate in the movement. Third, their lives were less circumscribed by social practices and their families did not disapprove their public participation.

The participation of women in the 1921 phase of the movement in Assam was not quantitatively high but ‘qualitatively’ their participation was significant. The small group of urban educated and elite nationalist women set the precedent for the masses to follow. Gandhi urged all women to join the struggle by insisting that constructive works like spinning, weaving Khadi, teaching etc. were as important as attending meetings. He played a key role in offering assurance and confidence to the guardians of women participants. Besides, some women were also encouraged by the men in their household.\footnote{Aparna Basu, 'The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom', in B.R. Nanda, ed., \textit{Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity}, N-Delhi, 1976, p.37} The Congress leaders were also aware that without the participation of the masses of ordinary and rural women, it cannot claim to be representing a unified Indian nation.

It is important to note that the political upheavals were a trying period in many women’s lives, particularly those who had so far led a life of seclusion...
within the domestic sphere. For the common women, it was difficult to adjust to
the political changes in the public sphere compared to those who were born or
married into politically active households. Family dynamics played an important
role in encouraging or inhibiting women’s involvement in public activities.
Gandhi stressed on women first fulfilling their duty within their home because
only then it would enable them to participate in the public spaces without
dismantling the existing family structure. Women thus entered the public sphere
without completely disassociating themselves from the domestic ideology, an
inherent dichotomy in Gandhian strategy.

With the domestication of the public sphere, there was also the process of
politicization of the domestic sphere. Events in the public sphere were affecting
women’s lives within the domestic spaces. It was not only the women but the
whole household which got evolved in the movement. Their involvement was
further facilitated by emphasizing upon the norms of respectability and
segregation. Their involvement in the public sphere stretched from the Non-
Cooperation Movement of the 1920s to the Civil Disobedience Movement of the
1930s, to the Quit India Movement of the 1940s to the Anti-Grouping Movement
just prior to independence. In the 1920s, women’s public participation was
limited, but during the next two decades, the constraints diminished. The primary
reason was that a larger number of women became educated and a precedent had
already been set by women, especially from elite households. Further, in the later
half of the 20th century, women became more politically aware and their
households found it easier to accept them going outside their home.
The movement was dependent on the ‘mass’ participation of ordinary simple women, whose voices were, however rarely heard. The newspapers and police extracts of the period, while reporting on meetings at various places in Assam, only listed the names of women leaders like Chandraprova Saikiani, Amalprova Das etc., and included little information on the other hundreds in attendance. Only the leaders were named, the others became ‘five other women’ or ‘seven others’. While the heroic portrayal of women leaving their homes and coming on the streets is well documented, there were also scores of other women who did not cross over the domestic threshold, but contributed immensely to the cause of freedom by patiently bearing the hardship which followed the participation of male family members in the household. For a woman to stoically bear long separation from her husband or son, to face mental trauma of his imprisonment and disappearance for weeks was to undertake another form of sacrifice. These women were bound not only in conservative tradition but most of them were economically dependent on their menfolk. Though, they did not cross over the boundary from the domestic sphere to the political, yet, they identified with the national movement by supporting their husband’s activities, and managing their household and children during an economic crisis. There were also instances of women who had to undergo much discomfort and harassment with frequent police raids on their home at odd hours in search of a nationalist worker. The example of Annaprova Barua of Golaghat may be cited in this context. Women’s nationalist activities within the domestic spaces also suggest that political activism does not always involve marching in the streets and so on. The transformations within the domestic sphere often reflect the intimate connections between the home and the nation, the public and the private.
With the progress of the movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and the increasing number of women involved in picketing and processions, it was found difficult to mobilize larger number of women for action. In this context the formation of women’s organisations like the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti, the Nowgong Mahila Samiti and more importantly the Assam Mahila Samiti (AMS) was a landmark as far as the status, role and activities of women were concerned. It provided a common platform through which women began to voice their socio-political rights and duties. The forty-first session of the Indian National Congress at Pandu provided ample scope for the women to demonstrate their close affinity to the Congress movement and showcase their skill in spinning and weaving. The Assam Mahila Samiti (A.M.S) despite being an apolitical, socio-cultural voluntary organisation supplemented the Congress efforts in arousing the women of Assam and consequently drawing more and more of them to the national movement. The role played by Chandraprova Saikiani as President of the A.M.S was noteworthy in this respect. Gandhi’s insistence that constructive work was as important as political work, sanctioned a numbers of activities which drew and attracted women who were not able to join the political movement directly. Many spinning and weaving centers were opened by the Samiti in different places. To facilitate the sale of products of the women weavers, Sipini Bhorals or ‘weavers’ stores were opened at the initiative of the Mahila Samiti’s. The Kamrup Mahila Samiti opened such a store in Gauhati in 1928. In keeping with the constructive programmes of the Congress, the A.M.S. played a creditable role in the anti-opium and the anti-untouchability movement of the province. Though, the Mahila Samiti tried to remain apolitical, many of its members joined the political
movement and were also Congress Party members. It must however be noted that the A.M.S. was associated but not integrated with the Congress.

The elite women who joined the national movement were also members of social organisations. But this was not true of the women who formed the rank and file. Very few of the rural women, lower class women in the province, who participated in picketing and processions connected with the national movement, belonged to even the local women's circles.

In 1930, the Congress Working Committee decided to undertake the Civil Disobedience Movement after a series of political disappointments with the British Government. Sarojini Naidu wrote in 1930, “The time has come in my opinion when women can no longer seek immunity beyond the shelter of their sex, but must share equally with their men comrade all the perils and sacrifices for the liberation of the country”. One of the most significant features of this movement was the unprecedented scale of participation of women throughout India. The Brahmaputra Valley too witnessed the mass participation of its womenfolk. The symbolic and nationalistic significance of domestic items like salt and cloth were re-emphasized when shops were picketed in the public sphere. The mass mobilization of women under Gandhi’s charismatic leadership can best be understood in terms of his ability to translate ordinary domestic items like salt and cloth into effective political symbols. Women of the province enthusiastically participated in the public bonfire of foreign clothes, picketed shops selling foreign goods and wore home spun Khadi. These were acts which

194 Manmohan Kaur, op.cit, p-175.
went a long way in restoring the pride and demand of indigenous industries. Further, women leaders like Chandraprova Saikiani, mobilized peasants for the forest *Satyagraha*, involving non-payment of grazing fees, and cutting grass and timber from reserved forests. Women's involvement in picketing, demonstrations, boycott etc made them realize that they were not as weak and helpless as they had come to believe. The men too developed a new respect for their strength and ability to suffer. Following 1930, the women of the province were able to make tremendous impression through their involvement in agitational politics.

The Quit India Movement drew the largest number of women to the forefront of the movement and it could well be a reflection of changing domestic attitudes towards public life. Women martyrs of colonial Assam dates from this time onwards. At least thirteen women of the Brahmaputra Valley in the age-group of 13-65 years had laid down their lives, and many more were wounded or mained for life.\(^{196}\) The spirit of sacrifice was stretched beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere, and in the public sphere women faced the atrocities of the police, bore tremendous hardships while picketing or demonstrating, courted arrest and even sentenced to imprisonment. Women of the Valley also took on leadership roles when the men were imprisoned, and the police was evidently more savage on rural women with reports of lathicharges, firing and even molestation charges pouring in.

The increasing government repression forced a section of women of the province to challenge the effectiveness of non-violence as an effective strategy

\(^{196}\) Dipti Sharma, *op.cit.*, p.341
for political liberation. They involved themselves in daring activities like those of the *Mritu Bahini* and were therefore exposed to various degrees of violence. The aggressive qualities of feminine deities like *Shakti* and *Kali* were emphasized, thus constructing a different notion of feminity.

Lastly, a significant aspect of the women's public participation in the province was the imprisonment of women *Satyagrahis*. Arrests were made for leading processions, holding meetings, delivering provocative speeches, hoisting National Flags etc. The act of courting arrest was an unmistakable pointer of determination, courage and commitment to put an end to British rule. By entering the jails, the women of the Valley, as elsewhere, dispelled the commonly held belief about women being weak, subordinate and docile. The prison became a temporary residence for many women activists like Chandraprova Saikiani, Amalprova Das, Pus'palata Das and others. Women for the first time found that they could associate with other women without the supervisory gaze of the men. Sharing living space encouraged a feeling of collective struggle and solidarity against colonial rule. The prison emerged as a site of humiliation and separation from families and also a site of resistance against British rule.

The link between women's education and their inclination towards the nationalist movement was evident. Educated middle class and elite women adopted new roles in the public domain and engaged in a range of activities such as social reform, spreading the nationalist message and mobilization for the movement. Infact, young men and women who were literate, educated in English or vernacular provided the most active cadres of the Congress and other political organisations. However, it is equally important to take note that illiteracy did not
stop the development of political consciousness among the common populace, though the literati set the precedent and led the way.

It would be incorrect to suggest that all women had similar political motivations and enthusiasm. Some were actively encouraged by their fathers and husbands to participate while some were drawn by the enthusiasm which the movement generated. Political activities could also be sporadic, with women involving themselves in nationalist activity for a day and then not taking part any further. On the other hand, there were women who participated throughout the nationalist phase, until India’s independence in 1947. The mass participation of women of the Valley cannot be traced out to a single factor. It was a complex outcome of the changing forces at the social sphere and the consequent responses it generated on the public sphere. Despite varied motivations, women’s participation set a precedent for future generations regarding women’s important role in nation-building. It carved out political niches for the younger generation. The colonial Assamese women in their journey from obscurity to visibility “brought a new generation that was more articulate, more politically aware and more conscious of their rights as women — that was their biggest nationalist act.”

197 Suruchi T. Bjorkert, op.cit., p.264