Chapter VII.

Conclusion

The role played by the women of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the freedom movement is a story of their devotion, sacrifice and patriotism and it will go down in history as one of the most remarkable contributions towards the attainment of Swaraj.

The participation of the women of Assam in the early 19th century state polity was restricted only to the female members of the royal or noble families, mostly in connection with issues like claims for the throne for near relatives or attempts to install a prince on it. The contemporary social condition was also not congenial for the emergence of the womanhood as a socio-political force. The Burmese invasion in the early part of the last century followed by the British annexation and import of alien cultural elements into the province, adversely affected the otherwise free and simple life of the women of the Brahmaputra valley. Prior to these changes, the women belonging to the fold of the traditional peasantry in Assam, enjoyed a social status almost at par with their male counterparts. They were free from the social evils, like Sati, Purdah, dowry, etc., before the import of the alien culture. But under the changed socio-political
environment, the liberty of the women became restricted and they became more dependant on men which led to greater male domination. Even then, practices like, Sati, infanticide, etc., could not enter Assamese social life.

In the period before 1915, there was no organized movement for women's participation in social and political fields. The Assam Association as a socio-political organization of that period could not enlist the women-folk to play any direct role in it. However, the formation of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in 1915 marked the beginning of women's organization in the Brahmaputra valley districts of Assam.

The emergence of Gandhiji in the Indian Political scene, his tremendous confidence in women's capability, and his high impression on the women of Assam, encouraged the women to fight for the cause of the nation throwing away their 19th Century seclusion. Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 gave enough sense of self-confidence to the women, and they were drawn to the national political life by his charismatic personality. But the participation of women in the 1921 movement was, however, small in scale and their involvement was largely elitist in character. The important factor for this was the family influence. Political awakening in the national context was confined to the women relatives of provincial Congress
leaders and workers with middle-class background of the urban areas and very few women associated themselves with other socio-cultural activities. The concept of nationalism and identification with the freedom movement among the masses of the rural women was negligible during this period.

However small in number, the contribution made by the women of the Brahmaputra valley in the non-cooperation movement was significant in the sense that they gave the lead to the vast mass of energetic and confident women to come forward to participate in the movement a few years later.

In the days when the rural people could not think of any alternative to the British Raj, few women workers with great dedication took up organizational work among the rural women to educate them in the art of the movement and to spread the message of Gandhiji and the Congress. During the post-1921 period the anti-opium and anti-drinking campaigns penetrated deep into the minds of the people and herein a significant contribution was made by the women. Malati Mem, alias Hungri, whose name should have figured among the martyrs of this period, had sacrificed her life for the cause of the temperance movement in 1921. The most important achievement on the part of the women Congress workers of 1921-22
period was the revitalization of the dying craft of spinning and weaving as a medium to make the programme of boycott of foreign goods more effective.

With the widening of the scope of the freedom movement, the women of the rural areas were gradually drawn to it in even larger numbers either through the efforts of the Mahila Samitis, or by individual efforts of women leaders. The formation of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti which was followed by women of different parts of Assam to form similar organizations and the participation by a section of women in the 1921 movement paved the way for the development of the Assam Mahila Samiti at the provincial level in 1926. The formation of the provincial organization was a landmark in the history of women's organization in Assam. It afforded a common platform for the women of the province to ventilate their views and assert their political and social rights. The 41st session of the Indian National Congress held at Pandu gave the women of Assam an opportunity to display their devotion to the Congress. By producing the entire Khadi required for the decoration of the Congress pandal and other temporary constructions of the complex, the women of the valley demonstrated their skill in spinning and weaving on the one hand and their sense of duty and patriotism on the other.
The incorporation of the ideals of Constructive Programme of the Congress in the objectives of the Asom Mahila Samiti, helped in the mobilization of women to participate in the programmes of the freedom movement. The Asom Mahila Samiti emerged in this period as an action-oriented and a reformatory body and this supplemented the Congress efforts in drawing more and more women to the movement. Nevertheless, the AMS always pledged itself to be a non-political, socio-cultural voluntary organization. Its role in the expansion of female education and other women welfare works during the years 1926-1930 contributed in arousing the women in the rural areas.

In the period between 1930 and 1934, the women all throughout India came to the forefront of the movement. In Assam they took up publicity works, held meetings, organized processions, picketed liquor, opium and foreign goods shops and in the course of participation in these activities they faced police lathi charge, courted arrest and suffered imprisonment. The large scale participation by the women of the Brahmaputra valley in this phase of the movement indicated their identification with ideals and ethos of the national movement. What was more significant was that an overwhelming majority of the women participants in this phase
were from the rural background having no knowledge of even the three 'R's.

The credit of making the anti-opium campaign a success in Assam goes basically to the women. Dariki Dasi, an opium worker of this period and a martyr, left behind the example of women's devotion to the programme of the Congress. An equally important programme of this period was the anti-untouchability campaign, in which many women of high castes extended full support and co-operation by giving up their traditional conservatism in this regard to eradicate the evil practice in whatever form it existed at that time.

In the 1935-39 period, the women of Assam devoted themselves mainly to organizational and constructive works. It was, in fact, a period of lull so far as the movement was concerned.

In the 1940-41 Satyagraha, because of the restrictions in the first two phases, the women could participate only in the third phase. The opening of the Women's Department in the APCC in 1941, was an important step in the direction of drawing the women closer to the Congress. In reality, the activities of women's organizations were merged with those of the Congress with the formation of the Women's Department within the Congress.
The 'Quit India' movement drew the largest number of women to the forefront of the movement. They came out to join the movement with the mental preparedness to face any eventuality that might come in the way of attaining the independence of India. At least thirteen (13) women of the Brahmaputra valley, in the age group of 13 to 65 years, had laid down their lives and many became invalid for the whole life due to police and military beatings, bayonet charge and firing. The women of this region possibly surpassed all other women of the country in terms of their courage and sacrifice in the 1942 upheaval.

One is prone to say that the 'Quit India' phase of the freedom movement in Assam, was very substantially a struggle waged by her womanhood. With the arrest of the Congress leaders in the province, women took charge of the situation and carried on the movement by bearing the brunt of the wrath of the Raj. The protest against the British oppression was demonstrated by the women in their thousands by taking out processions and by holding meetings and demonstrations. The increasing Government repression forced the women of the province to take more resolute stand and daring ventures like joining the Mrityu Bahini. The sacrifices made by teen-aged girls, mothers with babies in their wombs and old women and the defiance of bullets and lathis by thousands
and hundreds of women speak of their valour and dedication to the cause of the nation.

In addition to their direct participation in the declared phases of the freedom movement, many women turned their own domestic world into shelters and sanctuaries of the Congress workers. Although, the women of the Brahmaputra valley largely followed the creed of non-violence, there were some who joined the underground activities and helped the extremists either directly or indirectly, again motivated solely by patriotism.

The sufferings of the women of this part of Assam, in 1942-43 period, knew no bounds. Police and military atrocities of all kinds became a part of daily life for the women of all ages. The womenfolk of Nowgong were subjected to the worst types of atrocities as a method of suppression of the uprising. In the jails too, the women prisoners had to face diverse types of maltreatment.

The 1944-46 period of the movement in Assam is marked by the achievements of the women in constructive programmes. This programme found a fertile ground in Assam. The women made immense contributions to the success of these programmes in Assam.
The women of Assam in their heart of hearts were Indians and were wholly wedded to the ideal of Indian nationalism. The women of this part of Assam once again demonstrated their loyalty to the nation and their determination by playing a commendable role in the anti-Grouping movement in 1946-47.

It is a matter of regret that in spite of the selfless contribution made by the women of the Brahmaputra valley towards the success of different programmes of the freedom movement in Assam, their sacrifice and sufferings did not receive due recognition from the people and the powers that be. This observation is made on the basis of personal statements and interviews with a large number of freedom fighters. Many women, who had endured silently the worst of sufferings during the participation in the movement, have already died but many who are still alive, proudly remember their activities and at the same time lament over the neglect shown to them by the Government and other agencies. Mungri of Lalmati (Darrang), Dariki Dasi of Golaghat, Rebati Lahon of Teok, Abali Kuchuni of Nowgong, Lila Neogani of Lakhimpur, Padumi Gogoi, Golapi Chutiani, Thunuki Das, Jaluki Kachariani and Kon Chutiani of Dhekiajuli (Darrang) who
laid down their lives for the cause of the nation are yet to find a place among the martyrs of the freedom movement, whereas sacrifices made by the persons of other parts of India in the similar ways have received appropriate recognition in the public mind as well in the official records.

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