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Female Resistance and the Quest for Freedom in Assam with Special Reference to Kanaklata Baruah

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Abstract

In the history of India's movement for independence from the British rule, role of Assam was crucial. During the first half of the nineteenth century, north-eastern region of India witnessed a sudden upsurge in anti-British protests movements. By the Treaty of Yandaboo, the British government brought Assam under their rule in 1826. Since then, the citizens of Assam had their heart set on fighting for freedom from the foreign dominion. Together with men, the women of Assam also threw themselves into the events that unfolded with the aim of ending the suzerainty of the Crown. The coming of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam in the year 1921, captivated Assamese men and women from all backgrounds. During this juncture, the more radicalised revolutionary women acted as one powerful force fighting closely together with their male fellows to cripple the administration of the British Empire. Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the case of female resistance during the freedom movement in Assam which has often been over looked in the history of India. The paper focuses on the contribution of Kanaklata Baruah, a brave rebel of Assam, who sacrificed her life fighting for the cause of her state. The paper explores extant academic literature and other secondary sources relevant to the topic.

Keywords : *Women; Quest for Freedom; Indian Independence Movement; Kanaklata Baruah; Assam; British rule.*

Introduction

Women's participation in the struggle for independence from years of British predominance is a critical domain of contemporary historical inquiry. Women have always played an active role in shaping society and civilisation. Across the ages, women in India have shown inexplicable determination and patriotism sharing the ideal of socio-economic and political improvement of their nation. During the struggle for Indian independence from the British colonial dominion, Indian women displayed indomitable spirit and prowess by shouldering critical responsibilities alongside men in the political space of the country. The bravery of these women transcended the nondescript, in terms of the active role they played as revolutionaries, the setting up of covert groups, publication of anti-British texts and bulletins as well as suffering harsh inflictions and torments.

India witnessed years of persistent struggle, conflict and warfare before attaining freedom from

the fetters of British predominance. The people of India had to hammer a tough path fighting against British paramountcy to liberate India from the political control of Britain. Indians resisted British control the right from the very start with the first nationalist movements taking shape in the early 20th century and culminating in the transfer of authority and command in 1947. Women involved in the independence movement in different appellations. Women of Assam also participated fervently in the freedom movement. Women played significant roles in agitation politics, developed their own political organizations and voiced their opinions, however, before the 1970's, their contribution and involvement in moulding the freedom movement was unacknowledged (Chandra, 1971). Particularly, the nationalist narratives paid undivided attention to only few mainstream women, thus, overshadowing the exceptional contributions of not only those at the margins but even obliterating the patriotism and sacrifices of women like Kanaklata Baruah, Tai Bai, Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade, Mausama Begum and so on.

In the initial stages of independence struggle, contributions of women appertained to commitment towards social reform, dynamic involvement in demonstrations and movements, and resistance against social barriers and patriarchal norms. The beginning of women's active contributions owed the seeds of intensive engagement and leadership in later stages of the freedom movement. The 19th century mothered women who steamed the urge to liberate themselves from social prejudices and discriminatory norms. The advent of reformers and activists during this time cultivated and nurtured women specific issues such as women's education, widow remarriage, child marriage, and social and political acclivity of women. Futurists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule assumed the role of catalysts for female consciousness and concerns comprehending that emancipation of women was necessary for both social upscaling and nation-building. With the nationalist movement shoring up during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women eventually evolved into influential characters in bolstering the nationalist claim for autonomy and self-rule. The active part played by of women in various nationalist campaigns and movements played a vital role in shaping the trajectory of the struggle.

Assam, situated in the North Eastern part of India has its own contribution to this apocalyptic struggle for liberation. Prior to the 13th century A. D. the areaon the eastern side of the Karatoya river, present day Assam, was called Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha till the rise of the Ahom kingdom.[1] (Gogoi, 2006). This region comprised of an extensive geographical region characterized by a significant extent of demography and way of life. Documented narratives of Assam depict the state's deep cultural traditions, ancient civilizations, medieval conflicts and colonial encounters. Assam came under British dominion (Baruah, 1986) after it's annexation in 1826 by the Treaty of Yandaboo.[2] The waves of anti-British uprisings by women in diverse parts of the country and Gandhi's appeal for non-cooperation movement against the British rule, reached this part of the country as well and Assam too witnessed unflinching resolution and heroism of women and their role while overthrowing the British domination from the region. Hailing from diverse regions, backgrounds, and life domains, these women were one

brute force ensign of freedom, that left an imperishable mark on in the history of Assam and India. During the struggle for liberation from British domination, women turned out to be the aphonic creators of change, reconstructing the ground for freedom with resilience, renunciation, courage and fortitude.

The freedom movement in India flared-up innumerable anti-colonial agitations across the length and breadth of the country. This period was highly consequential in the history of women emancipation in India. Gandhi's unbreakable spirit emboldened the women of Assam to break social barriers and exercise their agency in the crusade for freedom. Several gallant women epitomized the revolutionary zeal by participating in the freedom movement with unswerving determination, patriotism and dexterity. Apart from engaging physically, women often rendered intellectual insights and propagated women's rights and socio-economic reforms. Their narrations and compositions, speeches, and pleadings were instrumental in altering social perspectives and in furthering the revolutionary cause. Kanaklata Barua was one such women who was deeply inspired by the thoughts and ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi in overthrowing the British rule from India.

Objectives of the study

The study aims to analyse the significant contribution of women in the nationalist movement in Assam specifically that of Kanaklata Baruah in the light of secondary literature. It tries to understand the growth of female consciousness and their initiation into the struggle for liberation. Finally, the study seeks to interpret extant academic research on the role played by women Indian Independence Movement during the early 19th and 20th century.

Methodology

The paper provides an overview of the role played by women in Assam in the struggle for independence from British suzerainty by analysing secondary literature relevant to the study. The exploratory study is based on secondary sources like books, journals, articles, regional newspapers like The Deccan Herald, The Hill Times, Assam Tribune etc., E-magazines, E-libraries, internet sites, conference papers, reports, government sources like Government of Assam, sites for historical information, databases like Shodhganga, Research Gate.

Freedom Struggle In Assam

The annexation of Assam by the British in 1826 led to a series of revolts against the British predominance. The first revolt, called the Ahom revolt took place in 1828. It was led by Gomdhar Konwar, Haranath, Dhananjay Borgohain and others who striked the British repository at Sadiya. The revolt was supressed by the British and they strengthened their control over Assam. Another revolt which was led by Piyali Barphukan occurred there after. Piyali got the assistance of Jiuram Dulia Barua, Benudhar Konwar, Rupchand Konwar, Deuram Dihingia, Boum Chingfau and other nobles who succeeded in crushing the British camp at Rangpur. But Piyali and Jiuram were captured and

hanged while others were prisoned for fourteen years. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 that spread throughout India was led by Maniram Dewan in Assam. Both nobles and common man took part in this revolt. However, it was unsuccessful and Maniram Dewan and his accomplice Piyali Barua we're hanged in Jorhat jail in 1858.

In 1861, after almost three years, the peasants of Assam launched a revolt at Phulaguri in the district of Nagaon. In the year 1894 another peasant uprising was staged at Patharughat in Darrang. Both these revolts witnessed active participation of peasants in challenging the tyranny and repressive policy of the British administration in Assam. The British cold-heartedly quashed these uprisings and many peasants met their demise.

In 1919, the unnerving tragedy at Jallianwala Bagh, escalated the urge for freedom across the nation and in 1921 after Mahatma Gandhi took the lead, the movement to upthrow the British dominion assumed a heightened temperament and renewed spirit. As a result, the non-cooperation movement got kick-started by which the entire nation got united to impel the British and gain Swaraj (Panigrahi, 1984).

The year 1942 saw the surging struggle for freedom reach it's pinnacle when Gandhiji initiated the "Quit India Movement with the call "Do or Die". The nationalistic and patriotic fervour of this widespread upsurge stimulated the people of Assam too and there were widespread protests against the British rule. The confinement of Mahatma Gandhi along with other leaders soon after the launch of the movement further galvanised the people of Assam to participate actively in the freedom movement. On the 26th of January in 1930 when 'Purna Swaraj'[3] (absolute freedom from British rule) (Mochahary & Joseph, 2022) was announced it emboldened the people to protests through mass participation, start processions and hoist the tricolour on government premises across Assam.

In Assam, resentment against the foreign dominion unfolded in a calm manner initially, but soon after, oppression and brutality against the people aggravated and influential leaders of Congress like Gopinath Bordoloi, Pitambar Dev Goswami, Deveshwar Sharma and Mohammad Tayabullah were arrested. This intensified the frenzy and anger of the Congress leadership in Assam who there after turned to combative methods against British like turning rails off the track and burning trains, ambushing army outpost and fracturing communication channels. Several violent events broke in different areas of the state.

The Quit India Movement proceeded in a galactic way in almostall corners of Assam including Darrang district. People from diverse class, age, occupational pursuit and social and linguistic affiliations, joined the movement in large magnitude. Kushal Konwar, who was the president of the local wing of the Congress at that time was an avid follower of Gandhi's ideology of non-violence. However, false accusations of thwarting a train off the track and killing many British soldiers were labelled against him and he was hanged (IF, 2017). This act of the Britishers enraged the revolutionary groups of Gohpur and resulted in the withdrawal of British flags from all prestigious places and buildings and display the Indian National flag.

Female Voice and Resistance in the Assam Freedom Struggle

Feminist consciousness and participation of women in the nationalist struggle surfaced simultaneously in India with the awareness of rights and identity. With Mahatma Gandhi's appeal for active participation and inclusion of women in the Quit India Movement, many women from nook and corner of the country came forward to join the women's organisations that emerged at that time. This resulted in the integration of women's movements into nationalist movement. The crusade for women's socio-political rights in the Third World took shape out of the historical circumstances and concurrent times as nationalism. In addition, as ripples of the First wave of feminism swayed across Europe and America, it jiggled India as well. In different parts of the world women started demanding for the right to vote which aroused the consciousness of women in India too. Irish women like Margaret Cousins (Jayawardena, 1995) supported Indian women in their demand for representation in the minimal constitutional changes executed in early 1917. In this year, the Indian Women's Association[4] was found especially with the purpose of sending a contingent of women to Edwin Montagu, who was the Secretary of State for India at that time. The contingen tasked for granting suffrage rights to women in the new constitutional reforms which subsequently took shape as the Government of India Act, 1991 commonly called Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

Women from every walk of life fought as heroically as men to free to gain freedom from the British imperialism. When India's freedom struggle acquired the shape of a robust crusade women from also dived into the struggle. Women figured prominently in the freedom movement in Assam and their activism and bravery brought about tangible changes which were reflected in their dissenting voices and political agency during the long transitional period for independence from British colonialism. While there were women who persisted resolutely undeterred by authoritarianism and brutality of the British rule, others were bold enough to demand their fundamental rights and freedom that were crushed under the shadow of the British government in Assam. Women's involvement crossed beyond organisations and lectures to conscientious responsibilities in macroscale protests, demonstrations, condemnation and resistance movements. Acting synergistically with their male fellows, they orchestrated marches, demonstrated outside bars, and took part in Satyagrahas. Despite facing confinements, arrests and brutalitiesat the hands of British authorities, these women showcased remarkable courage and resilience.

The struggle for political, social, and economic freedom from British colonial empire has been viewed from multiple perspectives in the political discourse of India. In the early twentieth century, prominent Indian nationalists leaders held different conceptions and philosophies for creating a self-reliant India. Along with the male ideologues, women demonstrated their indomitable spirit and patriotic zeal in dismantling the oppressive rule of the British regime to reconstruct India based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. (The Deccan Herald, 2021). There were women rounding up in the streets and open places demanding the overthrow of autocratic regime that had been in place for long.

It was a signal that women wanted remarkable change for the betterment of their country and themselves. The sweeping engagement of women in resisting the British rule manifested the full immensity with which women steadfastly refused the British rule in Assam and contributed to organised opposition against the oppressive regime. It also demonstrated the powerful role that women could play in challenging the colonial domination, laws and rulesthat had failed to show regard for human dignity and value and provide them with autonomy, basic freedom, and uniform rights, who were till then seen as secondary citizens. The battle that women waged were not oriented to personal benefits, but to free the Assamese society from fear, discrimination and tyranny of the imperialist regime. Women of the time became well aware that such freedom could be achieved only through radical changes aimed at changing existing institutions, and overthrowing of the despotic rule in Assam. From *Chandraprabha Saikiani's* efforts towards women's education and employment to *Mangri Orang,* an Adivasitea garden worker popularly known as '*Malati Mem'* who fought against sale of foreign liquor and opium to *Dariki Dasi Barua's* picketing of opium shops during the civil disobedience movement, to *Bhanumati Talukdar* popularly known as *'Volunteerani Bai'* and credited with the title '*Sarojini of Assam',* who organised mass meetings throughout the state and urged women to follow Gandhiji's footsteps (Sharma, 1993). Assamese women acted as active agents in determining the freedom movement in their own unique and transformational way (GOA, 2020).

The arrival of the British in Assam brought about a gradual change in the socio-political sphere of the state. With the reformist movement and the freedom struggle, gender relations and the status of women came to be perceived with renewed insights. It heralded a new era for women as they moved from the domestic space to assume public roles with men. It was mostly the women with educated background who played the most crucial role in making the women aware about their potentialities and capabilities. There is a close connection between education of women and their sense of national identity and consciousness. Many women had first learnt about patriotism and nationalist movement once they entered the public sphere to acquire education. On the contrary, severa lilliterate women bound to the private sphere of the house were also active participants in the movement. In the course of their nationalistic activities, women got the opportunity to connect and associate with educated nationalist compeers. This association enabled them to acquire education in a number of other ways, most frequently within the enclosure of the jail. Towards the early part of the twentieth century, women throughout the country started realising the parallelism between education and women's empowerment. Educated women came to engage in criticizing, questioning and condemning the British domination of India (Chandra, 2009).

Many educated Assamese women took to writing as a medium for presenting the apathy, denial and social reality of the time. Popular figures like Nalini Bala Devi, a noted Assamese poet, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, induced patriotism and influenced other women to organize together and fight against British oppression through her poems like '*Alakananda', 'Smriti Tirtha', 'Shantipath (essay anthology) etc.* Together with Hemanta Kumari Devi and Guneshwari Devi, Nalini Bala opened a

khadi training centre at Guwahati to popularise swadeshi and non-cooperation movement by using khadi as a weapon against the British. Others like Swarnalata Baruah (1871–1932), daughter of Gunabhiram Barua, was a pioneer in the field of woman's emancipation and education in Assam and published a book, titled '*Aarhi Tirota (Exemplary Woman)'* besides contributing to *Asam Bandhu* and *Bijuli*. In Swarnalata Baruah's writings the temperament of Assamese women of the age was mirrored. Bidyawati Gogoi, a social worker and writer authored several books like *Rod Aru Dwaror Majedi, Syamantamoni Sandhyabonti* etc. Another poet, Jamuneswari Khatoniyar (1899–1924), wrote and compileda bevy of poems in Assamese named *Arun* in the year 1919. She also coordinated the *Juroni Sabha,* a religious and literary gathering at her house every evening, while Padmavati Devi Phookanani (1853-1927) composed her ideas on the conditions of women. Widowed at the age of 32, Padmavati wrote an article in Baheen, *"Bidhoba,"* which speaks of the harsh life of widows in Indian society. In another article named "*Samajot Tirutar Sthan"* (Women's Place in Society), she commented on the general condition of women in society.

The entire history of the freedom movement under went a change with thead vent of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene in 1917. With his experience of South Africa behind him, Gandhi was conscious of the female potentialities as passive resisters. As he experimented with his weapon of Satyagraha in India he felt that women could take part in it together with men. Women were drawn to Gandhi by his magnetic personality, his distinctive naturalness and transparent sincerity. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's (Nath et. al., 2021) ideas of social regeneration and his vision for women's empowerment, articulated during the All India Women's Conference in 1936, women in Assam developed a strong impulse to improve their status in society and take part in the freedom movement. Gandhi's encouragement for political participation and leadership of women and attaching the concepts of 'swaraja' and 'satyagraha' to the development of women brought about a paradigm shift in the freedom struggle movement in India, the ripples of which ran through the women in Assam as well. He wrote in 1921, "I have great expectations from women. I want that they should make an equal contribution for the attainment of Swarajya. Their job would become much easier if women did so willingly" (INC, 1921). At Gandhi's call, women from all over India joined the congress played an important role in taking it forward and making it successful. Triggered by his thoughts and visions, women of the Brahmaputra valley too played exemplary roles from the period 1920s to 1940s organising themselves as into various *samitis*, wings and factions.

Women were therefore, not mere add-ons to the Gandhian movement, but were an important part of it. In fact, when explaining his strategy of satyagraha and how it worked, Mahatma Gandhi had often expressed the view that he felt women would understand the method better. Satyagraha required a great deal of patience and forbearance, as well as moral courage. Gandhi felt that most women in India had these qualities. The early twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of many city and town-based women's associations. Unlike the girls' schools, these were initiated by women themselves. It was as if there was something in the air at that time which made women want to reach out to each

other, to do activities together and to broaden their mental and physical horizons. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927 stood out as a significant milestone, addressing women's concerns and advocating for social reforms. The emergence of visionary leaders like Kamala Nehru, Annie Besant, and Sarojini Naidu added vigour to the nationalist movement. These leaders fervently championed India's cause, inspiring women across the nation to join the struggle for independence, the ripples of which reached Assamese women as well.

Based on Gandhian ideals (Joshi, 1988) and amidst the mushrooming of women's organisations across British ruled India, the early twentieth century witnessed a growing number of mahila samitis (women's associations) in several towns in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam: Dibrugarh (1907), Sibsagar (1916), Nagaon (1917), Tezpur (1919) amongst others. Prominent women leaders like Kironmoyee Agarwala and Chandra Prabha Saikiani formed the *Tezpur Mahila Samiti* in Sonitpur district in 1919. Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-72) was co-founder of the mahila samitis in both Nagaon and Tezpur. She soon emerged as a key figure in the burgeoning mahila samiti movement and became the founding secretary of the provincial Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926 (Medhi, 2013). In 1921, Gandhi visited Tezpur and his appeal to women to focus on constructive activities like spinning and weaving as a way to contribute in the fight for freedom from British rule, gave renewed vigour and hope to the Samiti and women in general (Nath, 2018). Another women-led organisation *Nari Mukti Bahini* formed by a widow named Brahmomoyee in 1921 in the Cachar district of Assam worked towards emancipation, empowerment and education of women fostering their increased participation in the nationalist movement in Assam (Roy, 2019) in 1930, a young activist named Pushpalata Das formed '*Mukti Sangha'* along with Sarla Saxena, Punya Prava Barua and Jyotsna Majumdar to mobilize young women for the national movement. These women vowed to liberate their motherland from the foreign occupation. In 1926, the Assam Mahila Samiti, at the state level was formed as *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* with Chandraprabha Saikiani as the secretary (Bank & Littan, 2024). This was followed by the formation of other district and primary or village level *mahila samitis*. A large number of women participated in the movement, by engaging in meetings, taking to street protests and rallies, organising processions, boycotting schools, courts, and offices. Bidyawati Gogoi, another freedom fighter, hailing from Dhakuakhana founded the *Dhakuakhana Mahila Samiti* and worked hard to spread women's education in the greater Dhakuakhana area. The participation of women in India's historic struggle for freedom, their lives and sacrifices and hardships they bore are a strong testament to the role adopted by women and the capability of women's organisations in constructing their identity and shaping India's war for independence.

Women in the Brahmaputra valley walked alongside men in the struggle against anti-imperialist rule. Whilemany female activists accepted martyrdom with open arms others bore injuries and wounds in gunfire and baton charges. Some of these brave women who sacrificed their life were Dariki Das Baruah who died in imprisonment, Bhogeshwari Phukanani who was shot while marching forward with the national flag at Barhampur, Tileswari Barua who was shot dead while trying to hoist the

national flag at Dhekiajuli, Rebati Lahon who suffered from pneumonia due to filthy living conditions in jail and later died. Others like Kahuli Devi, Kumali Devi, Padumi Gogoi, Golapi Chutiani, Thunuki Das, Jaluki Kachariani and Kon Chutiani all sacrificed their lives at Dhekiajuli police gunfire in 1942. The pattern of women's participation in the politics of the freedom movement showed that they were drawn into the movement, not in the first instance after the arrest of their men folk. They were not cowed down by this punitive action of the Government. Instead, it strengthened their resolve to keep up the tempo of the movement and prevent it from dying out. The determined spirit of these women left the British authorities rather confused.

The Formative Years of Kanaklata Barua

Kanaklata Barua, popularly known as "Birabala" was a woman who made a pivotal contribution to the freedom struggle at the forefront in the Assam chapter of the movement. Kanaklata was born on 22nd December, 1924 at a village called Barangabari in Sonitpur district of Assam. Kanaklata grew up in the backdrop of a period of domination and defeat by foreign rule underscored by deep desire for independence. Her parents were Krishna Kanta Barua and Korneshwari Devi. Kanaklata was very attached to her grandfather who affectionately called her *'Aai'*. Being born in a family which relied on farming as a means of living she had to face adversity from a very small age. Nurtured and reared in the 'Dolakasharia' family in Gohpur district, patriotic qualities got ingrained in her from the very beginning.

Kanaklata had become radicalized from an early age; her parents had died when she was still a child, forcing her with the responsibility of looking after the household and her younger siblings. Kanaklata could study only up to third standard and there after had to drop out from school. She heralded a sense of responsibility and duty out of the adversities that shaped her destiny. The experience taught Kanaklata the importance of independence, and it also opened her eyes to the disparities in Assamese society, particularly in the inequalities present in gender roles.

The accounts of extraordinary sacrifices and heroism of freedom fighters like Kushal Konwar, Mohan Chandra Singha, Chandraprabha Saikia, Lakhidhar Sharma, Seniram Das and the like profoundly fired the imagination of Kanaklata Barua. She was also well-informed about the protests carried out for the shipping of bamboo and cane from the Gohpur pocket for building of pro tem camps for English soldiers amidst World War II by socio-political organisations like Chaiduar Rayat Sabha that took birth in 1931, under the stewardship of Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, More so, she was grounded in at a very young age with the tales of freedom struggle and dominion and oppression of Britishers by her maternal uncles who were popular Congress leaders at that time. Having grown up under the influence of such luminaries, Kanaklata cultivated the competency to challenge and baffle men of any creed. Though she was bound to the domain of home and it's responsibilities, the tales and accounts of struggles to achieve freedom heightened her intellectual curiosity about the outside world of politics and public debates.

Kanaklata Barua was *revolutionary feminist* who ardently believe din the freedom movement and believed that women should be able to defend their motherland. She was an outspoken proponent of greater involvement of women in revolutionary activity for the cause of the nation. She therefore joined the women's 'suicide squad' which was incredibly radical in nature. Her radical and extremist views aligned with the male extremist group of the time which made her believe in many of the ideas and conduct of the militant revolutionaries of the time.

Kanaklata Baruah and Assam's Fight for Liberation

Kanaklata Barua, from a quite younger age used to attend secret meetings of various students' organisations active in her village at that time. She was the youngest women revolutionary who gave her life for liberating the country from the clutches of Britishers. The Quit India movement of 1942[5] with Gandhi at the helm invigorated the spirits of young Kanaklata. The ideas of freedom and sovereignty that sparked the Indian war of independence further captivated the mind of Kanaklata Baruah which led her to actively participate in the movement to overthrow the foreign rule. Earlier, she went to join the Azad Hind Fauz, however, as she was still immature, the organisation did not accept her membership plea and her dream failed to get wings.

Kanaklata later joined *'Mrityu Bahini'*- a death/suicide squad. Her extreme dedication and stout-heartedness availed her membership of the organization though she was below the minimum age required for joining. Her radical and diehard nature subsequently got her leadership of the women cadre of *Mrityu Bahini.*

On 20th September, 1942, the rebellious faction of Gohpur led by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, planned to roll out the national tricolour at the district police station. Kanaklata voluntarily acceded to head a procession comprising of around 5000 unshielded villagers and young men and women, mostly students. Around 500 women from nearby villages lined the streets. Several volunteers from Tezpur and other nearby places arrived at Kalyanpur camp to join different death squads. Gohpur Police Thana was around 12 kilometre from new Purubbari tea garden where the volunteers halted for while. They were cautioned by the leaders about the imminent dangers they might confront in front of the Thana premises. The leaders instructed the women comrades to stand behind in the procession. Kanaklata opposed the instructions by refusing to stay at the back of the procession and said that if required," *female volunteers would forgo their lives for their native land*".[6]

Kanaklata's intense speech before her death left the audience spellbound and lighted their spirits. Equipped with armaments of valour and fortitude and propelled by an unflinching determination for freedom, Kanaklata, the radical revolutionaryforged ahead to the police station shepherding a massive congregation of women volunteers capturing everyone with the phrase:*" Joi Aai Asom", "British leave India", "Vande Mataram".*

The cry of "*Vande Mataram"* and resonance of instruments like conch-shells, brass-shells and barrels echoedwaves of grit, determination and selfless urge to gain freedom into the character and soul of the

advancing volunteers. Upon reaching the police station, Kanaklata declined to beg apology and resign to the opposition of the controlling officer of the police station, Rebati Mohan Som, and his constables who were armed to open fire anytime. Despite being repeatedly warned, of dire consequences, the crowd went ahead with their plan of hoisting the tricolour at Gohpur police station in Tezpur. Brushing off a gun, Kanaklata valiantly forced into the premise of the police station (Pathak, 2008).

Following this the police unpredictably opened fireand Kankalata was gunned straight on the chest. She crumbled down with a feeble cry *'March Ahead'* while still holding the tricolour in her hand. Her compatriot Mukunda Kakoti immediately took hold of the flag. Mukunda too encountered gunshots on the same spot as Kanaklata. Both Kanaklata and Mukunda died of police firing. However, their extraordinary sacrifice did not go fruitless and the Indian tricolour was ultimately hoisted at the police station. Consequently, the Quit India Movement in Assam gained strength in different areas of Darrang district such as Kalabari, Gohpur, Jamugurihat, etc. along with the town of Tezpur. It further rekindled the nationalistic sentiments of the people and large sections of society jumped into the movement for freedom to oust the Britishers from India.

Conclusion

In 1918 Lenin stated that experiences associated with liberation movements all around the world validates the truth that success of a rebellion or revolution is determined to a great degree by the extent of women's participation. During more than a century thereafter women were espied establishing and participating in reformist and revolutionary movements.

Women have always been the less visible and uncompensated contributors. Though they have remained at the centre of national and social struggles in India where they attended these protests in large numbers, they have not been given the recognition and respect they deserve barring a few elite class women. In this context of invisibility, it is utterly important to look back on their historic actions in these revolts and highlight the legacy of women in current mobilisations of resistance that have taken shape in India and Assam. It is with this aim to immortalise the contributions of women in Assam, especially the heroism of Kanalata Baruah that this paper is written.

The sway of World War I (1914-1918) and Russian Revolution (1917) on the thoughts and activities of colonised agriculture-based societies of the Third World provided maturity and strength to nationalist sentiments and raised the hope that the large mass of working people could overthrow the power-welding minorities. National Freedom Struggles emerged in Asia and Africa during the early 19th and 20th century while the free-market economies in Latin America witnessed the rise of resistance movements. Women played a crucial role in all these struggles. The Indian Home Rule League founded by Annie Besant, an Irish socialist and the osophist in 1916 was the most effective response to World War I. It saw the participation of women like Sarojini Naidu, Ambika Charan Majumdar etc. in many of the League's activities like organising political discussions, creating reading rooms in cities for education, selling of pamphlets and mobilising public opinion in favour of self-government by writing

in newspapers like New India and Common Weal. As a precursor to the Indian Independence Movement, it laid the ground across India, including Assam, to achieve self-rule from Britain. The Home Rule Movement brought people from diverse regions and faiths together and helped in their political awakening. The Khilafat Movement of 1919 too had it's impact on Assam. Resolutions were materialised all through Assam demanding the immediate return of the Sultan of Turkey to the throne. On 19th March, 2020 public meetings and hartals were organised in Gauhati, Goalpara, Jorhat, Sibsagar and North Lakhimpur (Bhuyan & De, 1978). Tarun Ram Phook and elivered speeches to at Maroain Kamrupon 26th February and at Hajo on 27th February 1921 against British deception and ill-treatment of Turkish Emperor. A number of community helpers were part of the gathering and took oath against consuming liquor.[7]

These struggles marked by active women leaders inspired women in Assam. The passionate and electrified speeches of these pioneer women generated in them a strong sense of national unity, democracy and self-governance, increased nationalist sentiments and encouraged them to engage in political activities and freedom struggle. Kanaklata Baruah came across as a brilliant representation of unconventional revolutionary feminism who took recourse to the incalculable political atmosphere to testify her progressive attitude. The female procession to uplift the national flag at Gohpur Police Station was in any event anil lustration of women's offensive activism during the freedom struggle in Assam. The unwavering engagement of women in the militant manoeuvres awakened their senses to their own emancipation and rights. The consciousness among the women folk about their equal rights was backed with the demand for socio-political change grounded on the ideals of liberty and equality. The freedom movement in Assam offered women of different social standings new forms of political assertion and expression. The new political space favoured new roles for females. It was this level-headed space challenging gender inequality that led Kanaklata Baruah to drift free from the traditional private confine and participate in the national unrest to safeguard her endangered motherland. The magnetic spirit for freedom demonstrated by this revolutionary young woman of Assamled her to embrace martyrdom for the nation at a tender age of 17 years. Many women were wounded in the Gohpur uprising. This rebellion galvanised other rebelling women patriots in various parts of the state.

The allegory of Kanaklata Baruah confronting death and leading other women as well as allegories of other loyalist women symbolized a nation built on there silience and self-sacrifice of women no lesser than men. Kanaklata Baruah was post humously christened as 'Shaheed' (martyr) and 'Birabala' (brave women). The heroism and patriotic fervour exhibited by Kanaklata Baruawill forever remain inscribed in bright letters in the archive of Assamese history and India's war of independence. Kanaklata's sacrifice paid off as Indiafinally earned independence.

The records of history most often neglect the compelling roles played by these women revolutionaries in the Indian freedom movement. These courageous women though often overlooked in historical accounts, were a crucial force in propelling and shaping the freedom movement across the region. It is a general misbelief that Assamese women in the independence movement were restricted

to secondary roles of caretakers, food preparers or message-carriers. However, many took bold roles as freedom fighters, planners and even leaders. Kanaklata's tale is one of resilience, perseverance and imperishable warrior. Her legacy lives on the continued fight for autonomy, indigenous rights, ethnic and linguistic identity. Kanaklata Baruah's sacrifice is an inspiration that needs to be etched in the annals of India struggle for independence. It is essential to acknowledge and celebrate the everlasting spirit and contributions of Kanaklata Baruah and other women brave hearts of the time. They have not only sculpted historical events but have also provided the framework for contemporary social and political changes.

Endnotes

i The Ahom kingdom also known as the Kingdom of Assam (1228-1826) was a kingdom of the late medieval period prospered in the Valley of Brahmaputra (contemporary Assam) in North East India for approximately 600 years in spite of attacks by Mughal rulers. Sukaphaa, a Tai prince from Mong Mao (the present Yunnan Province of China), established the kingdom. Under the leadership of Suhungmung the kingdom expanded significantly in the 16th century.

ii The Treaty of Yandaboo was a peace agreement which was articulated at the culmination of First Anglo Burmese War. The Treaty was came to force on 24 February 1826 after two years of hostility between British army and the Burmese (present day Myanmar). Both the East India Company and King of Ava (Ava existed as the capital of Burma during 1364-1841) ratified the treaty. Following the Treaty, Assam, Manipur, Arakan and Taninthai became the colonies of Britain. Available at: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/my-view/treaty-of-yandabo-assam-accord-and-assam-an-academic-discussion-9558/ Retrieved on: 09/09/24.

iii At Kaliabor in Nagaon district of Assam, the *Purna Swaraj* celebration saw the engagement of more than 400 women under the leadership of Kiran Bala Boro. According to reports, police prevented them and beat them for participating in the celebration. Kiran Bala Boro was arrested and taken prisoner.

iv The early nationalist movements saw the relentless rise of women's organisations. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) crystallized as a critical milepost of women's issues and championing for social reforms. All India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded in 1927 by Margaret Cousins in Poona is the oldest women's organization in India. The association of visionary leaders like Sarla Roy, Hansa Mehta, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and others added dynamism to the nationalist struggle. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All India Women%27s Conference. Retrieved on : 08/09/24.

v In the year 1942 complete Police Raj was enforced in Assam subjecting the people to untold sufferings and heinous atrocities, more so for the women. According to the Bordoloi Committee Report on Atrocities committed in 1942, at least eighty women of the Brahmaputra Valley were victims of such heinous police outrages, which included mass raping and molestations. Pregnant women also could not escape military brutality. Women were tortured both physically and mentally in various ways. Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, 23rd June, 1984 (henceforth APAl). Kamrup, Assam.

vi Biography of Kanaklata Baruah. Available at: https://devlibrary.in/biography-of-kanaklata-barua. Retrieved on : 25/10/24.

vii History sheet on T.R. Phookan, Confidential Home Dept. Poll. : 1924, K.W., X. to File No. 66, NAI; Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, p. 123.

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