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The Role of Assamese Women in the Constructive Programs of Freedom Movement

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Abstract:

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, India's struggle for Freedom attained the nature of a mass movement. Gandhiji involved both men and women in his various programs of Freedom Movement. It was Mahatma Gandhi who had great respect for women and had full faith in their power. Under the banner of Non-Violent Movement conducted by Gandhiji, along with the women of other states of India the Assamese women also were able to take part in the Movement for Independence against British Raj. In both the destructive and constructive programs of the movement women of Assam proved their patriotism. The names of Kanak Lata, Bhogeswari Phukanoni are counted as the leading freedom fighters not only of Assam but also of India. But there were a number of Assamese freedom fighters who following the constructive path shown by Mahatma Gandhi had made remarkable contribution in making the freedom movement successful in true sense by making the people self reliant so that they could attain the economic independence along with political freedom. Unfortunately, the works of these freedom fighters are not giving the due focus in the history of freedom movement, so they are not widely known.

The aim of this paper is to throw light on the Constructive Movement in Assam highlighting the dedication and hard works of those Assamese women who successfully carried out some of the constructive programs under Gandhiji. The study is analytical, mainly confined to the activities of the women of Brahmaputra Valley and is basically secondary data from all possible sources are to be utilized for the proposed study.

1. Introduction

Women always play an important role in the evolution of a nation's civilization. Accordingly, at the different stages of evolution of Assamese culture and civilization contribution of women is remarkable. It is true that very little information is available regarding the activities of women folk of pre-Ahom age. But after the advent of the Ahoms, a detailed account of their social status, involvement in politics etc are found. From this information gathered from history it is clear that the feeling of patriotism was in the blood of Assamese women. For example, the names of Jaymoti, Mula Gabhoru, Radha-Rukmini, and Sati Sadhoni can be cited who created history with their heroic deeds and sacrifices for their motherland. This patriotic zeal of Assamese women compelled them to jump into the freedom struggle of India. The non violent nature and specially the constructive programs of Gandhiji under banner of freedom movement attracted the Assamese women folk. Unfortunately, the services offered by these ladies of Assam are not given due focus in history so far. The names of Kanaklata, Bhogeswari Phukanoni etc are generally cited as Assamese women freedom fighters those followed the destructive path of Freedom struggle. Therefore, the research paper has made a sincere attempt to highlight the activities of those women freedom fighters of Assam who contributed a lot in making constructive movement of Gandhiji successful in Assam.

1.1. Objective of the Study

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- To know why did Gandhiji emphasis on the constructive programs as an essential part of the Freedom Movement.
- To find out the specific fields, chosen by the women of Assam under constructive programs.
- To trace out the area of activity where the constructive movement achieved much success in Assam.

2. Methodology

The universe of the study is the activities of the women of Brahmaputra valley following the constructive path under the banner of non violent movement of Gandhi.

Keeping in mind the nature, scope, objectives and the time factor for the study, the paper is prepared mainly relying on secondary data. The secondary data includes mainly the published works like books, journals, periodicals, seminar proceedings, news paper articles, research reports etc.

3. Findings and Discussion

Since 1885 after the establishment of Indian national congress, India had been struggling for freedom under the leadership of Moderate and extremist congress leaders respectively, but a very small section of Indians was involved in it. It was the leadership of Gandhi which made it a mass movement. Accordingly, the people of Assam irrespective of men and women joined the movement. The popularity of Gandhiji's leadership lied on his ideologies and the programs conducted the movement. On the basis of Satyagraha and Ahimsa, Gandhi conducted the freedom movement in two different paths: destructive and constructive. The destructive path conducted the programs like the boycott of govt. institutions, breaking of British laws, Hartals, fast to death, picketing at public places etc. On the other hand, constructive activities included the programs like: -

1. Weaving, spinning, popularization of Khadi.
2. Eradication of untouchability
3. Campaign against the habit of consuming intoxicants
4. Creating Hindu-Muslim unity
5. Popularization of Rastrabhasa
6. Bringing the messages of Gandhi to every nook and corner of India to gain mass support for the non-violent freedom fight.

There were some reasons which instigate Mahatma to introduce the constructive programs as a part of freedom struggle. First thing was that he realized the fact that gaining political freedom by driving out the British was not enough to consider India as independent. To avail the political freedom India should be self sufficient in every aspect and for that reason Gandhiji emphasized on the constructive movement which aimed at making the people self sufficient and the society free from social evils.

Secondly, Gandhiji wanted that his non violent movement should win the support of every Indian, and through constructive programs like organizing and popularizing the movement against British rule he wished to fulfill this aim.

The response to Gandhi's call for the constructive movement in Assam was very sharp, especially Assamese women folk was very much attracted to that path. Assamese ladies in both town and village areas got involved in executing the schemes offered by Gandhi in this line. They choose certain programs which they thought necessary and fit for the society of Assam at that time, such as: -

3.1. Organizing and Popularizing the Nonviolent Movement

With this mission the Assamese women freedom fighters, though very small in numbers at the beginning took the responsibility of bringing the messages of Gandhi and Congress to every corner of Assam. To fulfill this mission, they first started creating political awareness among the women of Assamese society in urban areas which increased in their number of volunteers and then almost in every district of Brahmaputra valley such women constructive workers set out in groups, they traveled village after village on foot, sometime to reach the remote areas they crossed rivers by small boats and rafts and thus carried the message of Gandhi to every house of Assam. As a result of their dedication the name of congress and Gandhi became so popular in the villages of Assam that the doors of the villagers remained always opened for sheltering and helping the congress workers and volunteers and thus Assamese women.

3.2. Eradicating the Habit of Taking Intoxicants

In Assam the British used opium as a weapon to bring the Assamese people under their control. The habit of consuming opium almost paralyzed the Assamese rural society, so it was necessary for Assamese people to make themselves free from this evil. Therefore, the Assamese women volunteers made door to door programs and tried to convince their fellow villagers about the harms of opium and kept strict watch on the buying and selling of opium. To a large extent their constructive activities proved successful in their fight against opium.

3.3. Abolition of Untouchability

In Puna Pact eradication of untouchability was made the main program of freedom movement. However, this social disease was not so severe in Assam yet some of the women freedom fighters decided to remove that small amount of unacceptable custom remaining in our society. They took initiative to include the Harijans into our social system by taking some revolutionary steps as example to follow.

3.4. Develop the Feeling of Self-Dependency

In pre independent era economy of Assam was mainly dependent on agriculture which was not sufficient for the nation to be economically independent therefore the constructive programs aimed to encourage the people to develop interest in other fields also, keeping in view the weaving skill of Assamese women, special encouragement was made in this field by establishing weaving and spinning centers at various places and also training of different cottage industries were arranged, in this way they tried to make the people economically self reliant.

3.5. Promotion of Rastra Bhasa

India is a country where people speak diverse languages. But for maintaining amity among the people which is extremely necessary for the success of the freedom movement and also to make a strong India after driving out the British, a national language was pressing need at that time. Therefore, Gandhiji emphasized on learning Hindi by all as Rastrabhasa. The women education was not very noticeable in Assam at that time yet a few educated women feeling the urgency engaged themselves in learning Hindi which enabled them to participate in the national level congress conferences and programs out of India.

Thus the women of Brahmaputra valley willingly came forward to carry out the above mentioned constructive programs in Assam. Though the credit of the success of the constructive movement goes to the women folk of Assam as a whole yet the name of some women must need special focus. Because under their earnest leadership and guidance, women of Assam from grass root level to top level were able to involve in these programs of freedom movement. The social set up of Assam in the earliest part of 20th century was a conservative one; it was not acceptable for society that women should take part in public activities openly. But the constructive programs attracted the women folk of Assam very much specially the emphasis given on weaving and spinning feel them comfortable. In Assam every woman was a weaver, weaving and spinning was a part their daily life. Therefore, Assamese women started the constructive movement with this skill.

In Kamrup district under the leadership of Vidyutprabha Devi the women of Guwahati engaged themselves in constructive work. On 18th August 1921 in Guwahati Gandhiji performed "Vastra Medha Jagna" and all the women present there put their valuable foreign cloths in fire. After the return of Mahatma, the all Guwahati women became active in checking the buying and selling of foreign goods. They entered nearby villages in groups and tried their best to make the villagers understood Gandhiji's program of Swadeshi. Hemanta Kumeri Devi, Guneswari Devi and Nalinibala Devi opened a weaving training centre in Guwahati for the extension of production and use of Khadi. The women weavers of Guwahati stunned everybody by stitching 500 khadi caps for congress workers during the visit of Gandhiji. Another important female figure in Kamrup was Guneswari Majumder, she was an outstanding weaver, she weaves much more than her need. So used to preserve excessive production from 1921 to 23 and sent a huge amount of Khadi to the Gaya congress in 1923 to distribute among the needy. The success of the weaving-spinning program was reflected in the Pandu Congress, all the cloth materials necessary for the conference, the huge pendal-cover, the bed sheet, pillow cover, curtains for delegate camps, were made of khadi supplied by women weavers of Assam. With the untiring efforts and hard works for six months continuously, they could supply the much needed Khadi cloths and the area of the conference came to be known as Khadi Nagar. Thus women of Assam made their skill of weaving as a weapon against the British and made the Gandhian ideology of Swadeshi successful in Assam.

4. Summery and Conclusion

In the Indian Struggle for Independence, women of Assam were deeply involved in every phase, from the non cooperation movement till the attainment of Freedom. But it must be confessed that in case of Assam, constructive programs of Gandhi were largely responsible for increasing the number of women participants in the freedom movement. They used to undertake one or the other activity on constructive line and thus kept the movement alive in Assam throughout the period.

From the above study a few conclusions could be drawn as follows:

- i. Gandhiji started the constructive movement to make the nation self sufficient so that the people of India become suitable for availing their independence. Basically he emphasized on the activities which would make everybody self-sufficient and would create the sense of one nation.
- ii. 2. Among the various programs offered by Gandhiji Assamese women basically concentrated on the campaigns related to their socio-economic problems, but the most spectacular success was seen in popularizing the Gandhian technique of Khadi and Charkha among the women folk of the valley. With the hard work of the Assamese ladies Assam's success in this particular field was tremendous. In fact, the weaving and spinning skill of Assamese women enabled Assam to rise in its full height in the matter of Swadeshi.

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