

Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle



DIPTI SHARMA



The Book

The book brings out the glorious contribution of the women of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam towards the attainment of Independence of India through their participation in all the phases of the Freedom Struggle in the period from 1921 to 1947. It highlights the sacrifices and sufferings of the women of Assam throughout the period of the struggle. The authoress records that as many as 15 (fifteen) women of the Brahmaputra valley have laid down their lives for the cause of the movement. A list of names of more than 1300 active women participants of the freedom struggle is appended to the book.

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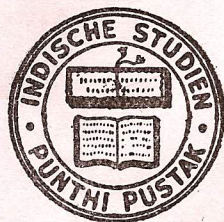
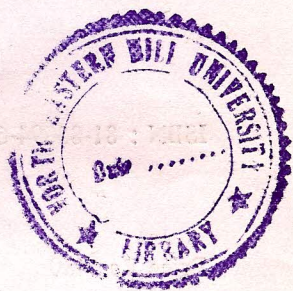
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The Author

Dr. Dipti Sharma is a Senior Lecturer in Political Science in Guwahati College, Guwahati-21. She graduated from D. C. B. Girls College, Jorhat in 1965 and took her M.A. degree from the Gauhati University in Political Science in 1967 securing First Class. Dr. Sharma obtained her Ph.D. degree from the Gauhati University in 1988. Dr. Sharma's field of interest includes studies on women and the freedom movement. She had contributed several articles to books, magazines and newspapers. She has attended a few conferences in India and abroad.

ASSAMESE WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

DR. DIPTI SHARMA



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PREFACE

The present study is an attempt to bring out the role played by the women of Assam in different phases of the freedom movement of India from 1921 to 1947. It has been my feeling that studies in this aspect of the freedom movement have not yet been adequate in the relevant literature and other scholarly works.

The present state of Assam is divided into two valleys, viz., the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma or Barak valley. The focus of our study would be the Brahmaputra valley which included the districts* of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang, Nowgong, Kamrup and Goalpara. This valley may be called Assam proper.

The year 1921 is taken as the starting year because, in that year, Assam was actively drawn into the orbit of national politics. The chapterization of the work is done on the basis of the phases of the movement highlighting the major events at the national and provincial levels followed by the role played by the women in each of them. The introductory chapter tries to present the social and political background of the Assamese society. It also gives a glimpse into the social and political environment under which the women of the valley joined the freedom movement.

The study is mainly based on official documents, interviews with some of the surviving freedom fighters and their personal statements, news papers, booklets and bulletins on freedom movement, souvenirs and journals, manuscripts, reports of different committees, AICC and APCC records and other Government publications. However, there was a dearth of information of women's role in the contemporary publications except the news papers. Except for a short period, all the

volumes and issues of the 'Asamiya' were consulted. In order to ascertain the authenticity of the news items and the information obtained through personal statements and interviews, all available records were consulted as far as possible. The Asam Mahila Samiti, which was the main women's organization working practically for the whole period of the movement and on which we could have depended much for materials for study, also could not provide us with any reports or written records of that period.

The Government reports also do not give sufficient information about women's involvement, owing possibly to the fact that the police generally avoided arresting women participants in the movement, unless they were found to have been involved in more serious incidents.

Some of the living women freedom fighters and their counterparts were interviewed ; and their personal statements were recorded. These interviews and discussions were of great value in understanding the extent and nature of involvement as also the sufferings and sacrifice of the women.

Names of about thirteen hundred and fifty active women freedom fighters were collected and sets of questionnaire were sent to 372 of them, reported to be alive. This was found to be one of the most important source of information. However, only 130 women, i.e., 35%, responded to the questionnaire. It has also been found that materials like secret messages, letters, bulletins, proceedings, etc. lying with the women were destroyed in the natural process because of neglect and poor maintenance and lack of knowledge about their historical value.

A list of women martyrs and freedom fighters, prepared on the basis of information available from different sources, is appended at the end of the book. But, at the same time, it is, however, felt that there are scopes for further micro level

studies which may reveal many more facts and information about women's role in the freedom struggle.

It is my humble belief that all authentic and available materials have been used in the study. All observations and facts in the book are reported as they came to my notice.

Guwahati, Assam.
24 February 1993.

Dipti Sharma.

* The districts of the Brahmaputra valley have since been reorganized into Sibsagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Darrang, Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Goalpara.

FOREWORD

It gives me much pleasure in writing this foreword for the book entitled *Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle* authored by Dr. Dipti Sharma. Originally, it was submitted, as a dissertation, for the Ph. D. degree (Arts) at the Gauhati University ; as I happened to be one of the adjudicators of the Ph. D. dissertation, I had been in a position to go through it very thoroughly and carefully. It is, indeed, a good piece of work and I am happy to see it in the book form.

Indian women's role in the freedom struggle of India is an extremely laudable one ; and they have won acclaim all over the world for their exemplary sacrifice in the cause of India's emancipation. People, here and abroad, eagerly look forward to receiving detailed information on the contributions of the women of India in this regard. Dr. Dipti Sharma has done a really worthwhile exercise in highlighting the women of Assam in the freedom struggle, their activities, their trials and tribulations, their sufferings all through the period.

To keep track on the minutest details of people and phenomena is not an easy job, especially, after the lapse of so many years. But all Kudos to Dr. Sharma that with her tenacity of purpose and single-minded devotion, she has been able to overcome all the hurdles !

I do hope that her book will be well received, here and abroad.

Bela Dutt Gupta

Dr. S. P. Mukherjee Professor of
Sociology (Retd) of Calcutta University,
123 Regent Estate,
Calcutta-92.

27 January 1993.

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I express my heartfelt gratitude to Prof. D. P. Barooah, former Vice Chancellor of the Gauhati University, without whose reassuring encouragement and inspiration this work would not have reached the present form.

In the course of the study, a few women freedom fighters, namely, Smti(s) Pupalata Das, Amalprova Das, Kiranbala Bora, Induprova Barua, Buddheswari Hazarika, Annaprova Barua, Swarnalata Barua, Ratnabala Phukan, Aikan Bhuyan, Aruna Bhuyan, Late Mohini Rajkumari, Late Rajabala Das and a host of other women were interviewed. I express my sincere thanks and gratitude to these women leaders for kindly bearing with me in the course of long sessions of discussions with them and providing me with invaluable information on the subject of the study. I am greatly indebted to all those women freedom fighters and their relatives who responded to the questionnaire by supplying valuable information without which this work would have been an incomplete one.

I am indebted to Shri Rabin Kakati (ex-M.P.), who supplied me with different source materials for the study and spared a lot of his time to have long discussions with me on different aspects of women's role in the movement. Equally valuable were my similar discussions with Shri(s) Debeswar Sarma, Sriman Prafulla Goswami, Purna Chandra Sarma, Benudhar Kalita, Tarun Sarma, Harendra Nath Barua, Mahendra Hazarika, Bidya Hazarika, Muktinath Sarma and other freedom fighters. I express my gratitude to all of them.

In connection with the interviews with the women freedom fighters in different parts of Assam and in the collection of materials, many people helped me in different ways. To name only a few of them were, Shri(s) Ram Kumar Bhattacharyya, Nabin

Bora, Bishnu Kakati, Sarat Kumar Dutta, Amar Saikia, Sarat Barkataki, Ghanashyam Goswami, Devabrata Sarma (Dulu), Bhaben Barua, Smti(s) Padmamala Devi, Moromi Goswami and Sabita Barua and many others in different places. I take this opportunity to express my gratefulness to all of them.

I express my gratitude to the staff of the Directorate of the Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam, the National Library of Calcutta, the State Library of Assam, the District Libraries of Nowgong and Kamrup the libraries of the Gauhati University, the J. B. College and the Guwahati College and the authorities of the H. K. Das Memorial Library of Guwahati, for allowing me to consult their Libraries. I am thankful to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and the National Archives of India, New Delhi, for giving me access to consult the connected materials in their respective Libraries.

I am not only thankful but also obliged to Dr. D. B. Sharma of Gauhati University for his continued support and inspiration and help that he gave me throughout the whole project. I affectionately record my deep appreciation of the co-operation that I received at the time of preparation of this work from my two sons Sibn and Dabu at their minor age.

I am greatly indebted to the University Grants Commission for awarding me a Teacher Fellowship for this project with necessary financial assistance. I am also thankful to the Principal of the Guwahati College for allowing me to avail myself of the U. G. C. fellowship granted to me.

I express my deep sense of gratitude to Prof. Bela Dutt Gupta for kindly writing the foreword to this book with highly encouraging comments.

Dipti Sharma

ABBREVIATIONS

A. A. G. S. C.	=	All Assam Girls Students Committee.
A. I. C. C.	=	All India Congress Committee
A. I. S. F.	=	All India Students Federation
A. I. W. C.	=	All India Women's Conference
A. L. C.	=	Assam Legislative Council
A. M. S.	=	Asam Mahila Samiti
A. P. A. I.	=	Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence
A. P. C. C.	=	Assam Provincial/Pradeshik Congress Committee
A. P. M. S.	=	Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti
A. P. P.	=	Asam Prakashan Parishad
A. S. S.	=	Asam Sahitya Sabha
B. M. Y. A.	=	Bharatar Mukti Yujant Asam
C. D.	=	Civil Disobedience
C. D. E.	=	Civil Disobedience Enquiry (Committee)
C. W. C.	=	Congress Working Committee
D. C.	=	Deputy Commissioner
D. C. C.	=	District Congress Committee
D. I. R.	=	Defence of India Rules
G. S. C.	=	Girl Students Committee
H. F. M.	=	History of Freedom Movement (collected materials)
I. W. S. A.	=	International Women's Suffrage Alliance
N. A. I.	=	National Archives of India (New Delhi)
N. M. M. L.	=	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi)
P. C. C.	=	Provincial/Pradeshik Congress Committee
P. S.	=	Personal Statement
P. St.	=	Police Station

R. E. C. F. F.	=	Report of the Enquiry Committee of the Freedom Fighters, Assam.
R. I.	=	Rigorous Imprisonment
R. T. C.	=	Round Table Conference
S. D. C.	=	Sub-Deputy Collector
S. D. O.	=	Sub-Divisional Officer
S. I.	=	Simple Imprisonment
W. C.	=	Working Committee
W. D.	=	Women's Department
W. I. A.	=	Women's India Association

CHAPTER

1

INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

India has produced great women throughout her long political, social and cultural existence. One is reminded by the history, of the gallant role played by Indian women in the period between 1921 to 1947 for the attainment of 'Swaraj' for India. The women of Assam also played their part in the freedom struggle with great distinction.

Status and position :

The role of the women of Assam in the freedom movement has its background in their past heritage. A brief picture of their position in the pre-1921 period is necessary to understand and appreciate the nature and extent of women's contribution to the movement.

The position of woman in any society is regarded as "a significant pointer to the level of culture of that society". Her position in the society is determined on the basis of the social values, and the trends or tendencies prevailing in the society. When the progressive trend holds ascendancy

in the society, her position is improved greatly, "her status elevated, her subjection diminished and her rights extended" and her participation in social life becomes purposeful and meaningful. But the forces of reaction may lead her to a state of degradation and humiliation.¹

In the Vedic age women of India enjoyed a high status. She had freedom of movement, education, religious rights and equal opportunities with man. But this freedom came to be curtailed by the rigidity of the prevalent social customs and practices. However, with the emergence of Buddhism, women's status came to be improved again in different spheres of life. But the status of women again faced rough weather with the advent of foreigners in India.²

A clear picture of the position of women of the pre-Ahom period cannot be traced from the available literature. But it can be safely assumed that in the absence of major Aryan influences in those days, the position of women of Assam was bound to be different from the other parts of India. However, some information about the condition of women is available for the Ahom period.³

During the Ahom period (1228-1838 A. D.) the society was divided into various ranks; and such a classification affected the status of women. The princesses and the women members of the royal and noble families and the families of the high officials constituted a distinct class. They enjoyed a high status in public. But the women belonging to lower classes naturally enjoyed a low status. The existence of the practice of slavery during that period contributed towards lowering of the status

of women. The women of lower classes could be purchased as household slaves by the nobles and officials even at a nominal price of Rs. 3. Such women slaves were allowed to marry; but their children were indentured.⁴ A wide gap between the upper classes and the commoners was evident.

The upper class women of the Ahom period also took interest in politics. The queen mothers used to act as regents of their minor sons. The elderly women members of the royal families were quite often found to have taken part in discussions with state ministers on political matters.⁵ In the eighteenth century, the Ahom administration was run consecutively by three queens, namely, Phuleswari alias Pramatheswari (1714 A. D.), Ambika alias Madambika (1721 A. D.) and Sarveswari (1739 A. D.). All these queens of Sivasingha showed great ability in administration.⁶ A few Assamese brave women also fought battles with the enemy soldiers. Mulagabharu, an Ahom woman, laid down her life fighting against the Mughals in sixteenth century.⁷ Her name still continues to be a source of inspiration to the women of Assam.

In general, the position of women among the rural masses in the pre-British period, was satisfactory. She enjoyed an equal status with man in the day to day socioeconomic life. One of her major economic activities was spinning and weaving over which she had exclusive monopoly. Women of all classes used to weave clothes. She provided the members of the family with clothes woven by her.⁸ Evil practices like 'Sati' and female infanticide were unknown in Assamese society. Commenting on the women of Assam, Gait said—"Women were refined and

enlightened and active and versatile in their accomplishments". Widow remarriage was prevalent except among the high castes. Outside the fold of the Brahmin castes, child marriage was not practised by the other castes. The Assamese Society has been free from the evils of the dowry system.⁹ But in some parts of Assam, the system of paying 'ga-dhan' i.e., bride price was prevalent.¹⁰ Divorce by the woman was permitted and she had full liberty to marry again except among the high castes.¹¹ Among the lower castes, the social customs that might cause inconvenience to women were hardly encouraged. Because of the diversity in respect of cultural and ethnic background of the people, certain amount of variations in respect of customs and practices among the women of lower castes were there. Again, there were certain noticeable differences in status and position among the women of the higher castes and those of the lower castes owing to the existence of the traditional conservatism.¹²

In the transitional period from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the position of women deteriorated with the advent of the foreigners. The Maghul and the Burmese invasions came down as a curse on the Assamese woman. The invaders showed disrespect to woman and committed crimes against them.¹³ During the Burmese invasions, the women were the worst victims.¹⁴ The tide of her good life ebbed, her freedom curtailed and she became the most suppressed section of an exhausted and subservient people in the subsequent period. In such a state of insecurity, the Assamese Hindus preferred to give their daughters in marriage at an early age and at times to married persons of the same community to protect their daughters from being carried away by the invaders. But with the passage

of time, these measures turned into social customs like early marriage and polygamy.

With the advent of the British, the old order of the society started to change very slowly. But there was no conscious effort on the part of the British to improve the lot of the Indian women. Till the middle of the nineteenth century, a woman in Indian society was considered as fit only for the household work and the only place she deserved to occupy was the kitchen.¹⁵ Along with the British, however, came the liberal ideas from the West; and this created an atmosphere in which some of our Indian reformers took the lead in making efforts at improving the condition of women with noticeable success.

A galaxy of nineteenth century socio-religious reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and others took up the cause of the emancipation of Indian women. They realised that better social status for the half of India's humanity, i. e. the women, was a prerequisite for India's progress. During this period, a few associations like the *Brahmo Samaj* and the *Arya Samaj* also gave an impetus to the movement for the upliftment of women.

Raja Rammohun Roy attempted to change the religious basis about certain social practices like *Sati* and child marriage by applying rational and humanitarian ideas, in the early part of the nineteenth century. Social reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen of *Brahmo Samaj* did pioneering work for the education of women. He opened school for education of women and popularized widow remarriage. A woman wing of the *Arya Samaj*

known as the *Arya Mahila Samaj* was also opened. In 1870, Son established the 'Indian Improvement Society' for the mental and physical improvement of women.

The untiring efforts of these reformers forced the British Government to pass certain legislations for the improvement of women's social condition. The system of *Sati* was declared illegal by an Act passed in 1829, and the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856.¹⁶

The movement for the upliftment of women was sporadic in nature in the nineteenth century, and no direct impact of this movement was felt in Assam. Even without the system of *Sati* and the prevalence of female infanticide, the condition of Assamese women continued to be poor. She was born and bred up to a strict seclusion. Being married at an early age and confined to a life of domestic solitude, she knew little about the world around her nor the world cared to know much about her. She was treated, more or less, as a living household machine. Commenting on the condition of the Assamese women, a mid nineteenth century account says.¹⁷

"Like most women of India, they are denied even the least portion of education, and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites, except in conjunction with their husbands, and hence that remarkable proof of barbarity—the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is also prevalent. The women in fact, are in all respects held in extreme degradation.....Early marriages are common, though in the lower classes many

young women do not succeed in getting husbands till the age of twenty. To these premature marriages, we are undoubtedly to attribute the general appearance of old age in the persons of the women, before they have reached even the meridian of life.Females are not included within the pale of education, every ray of mental improvement is carefully kept from the sex. As they are always confined to domestic duties, and excluded from the society of the other sex, the people see no necessity for their education. A woman's duties are comprised in 'pleasing her husband, and cherishing her children'. To this there are a few exceptions. In the higher ranks of life, and among families of some importance, the females are frequently taught to read and write".

The contact with the Bengali culture in the nineteenth century after the advent of the British, brought certain practices which were unknown in the pre-British Assamese women society. The *purdah* in the form of *Oroni* or Veil, penetrated into the Assamese society during this period which further lowered the position of women.¹⁸ The Muslim historian, Sihabuddin said that the wives of the Ahom kings and peasants alike never veiled their faces before anybody, and they moved about freely in public places.¹⁹ Another evil that made its appearance in the nineteenth century in the Assamese society was the dowry system. The Census Report of 1891 says that this system in a milder form was prevalent at that time.²⁰ Similarly, widow remarriage which was prevalent in Assam, except among the high castes, was also dying out in this period. The poorer section of the people, however, continued with this practice. But

even with them, a remarried widow was not at all considered to be equal in respect and status with that of a woman married for the first time. Such remarried widows came to be called with derogatory names like *dhemani*, *batalu*. etc. In fact, it was the prevailing Brahmanism which came in closer contact with the outside culture that had brought the practice of widow remarriage into disrepute and succeeded in lowering the solemnity and validity these marriages had in the past.²¹

Women's education, in general, was not encouraged. A conservative attitude amongst a section of the social elites was primarily responsible for this. In a series of articles published in the *Asam Bandhu* (1885-1886), the exposure of women to formal western education was totally discouraged. Women's education was considered as a threat to the position of man in society. These writings said that with education women would become more masculine in their nature and behaviour to the detriment of the social order.²² In an article (*Tirotar Bon Ki*, i. e. Duties of Women) published in another Assamese magazine, the *Mou* (the Bee) in 1886, the education of women was said to be more dangerous than the Burmese atrocities. The article said that the girls might be taught to read and write only at home by their own brothers or by women tutors. She should be given a little knowledge of arithmetic so that she might be able to carry on the domestic duties.²³

However, a few Assamese intellectual made an attempt to introduce certain progressive social reforms in the society more particularly for the improvement of the condition of women. Notable among them were Anundaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Gongagobinda Phukan and Hem Chandra Barua.²⁴ They came under the influence of the ideas and

philosophy of the *Brahmo Samaj* when they were in Calcutta. Jagyaram Khargharia Phukan, the uncle of Anundaram Dhekial Phukan, was one of the first disciples of the *Brahmo Samaj* under the leadership of Raja Rammohun Roy in the 1830s.²⁵ Gunabhiram Barua, following Jagyaram Phukan, was attracted to the *Brahmo Samaj* when he was in Calcutta in 1855-56. He was greatly influenced by the widow remarriage movement launched by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in 1855.²⁶ Gunabhiram Barua married Bishnupriya, the widow of Parasu Barua, a friend of Anundaram Dhekial Phukan in 1870.²⁷ Gunabhiram Barua took up the mission to popularize widow remarriage and to promote women's education. His liberal ideas on these two issues found appropriate expression in a series of articles he wrote in the '*Orunodoi*'.²⁸ Hem Chandra Barua was one who advocated widow remarriage with rational arguments, Gunabhiram Barua and Gongagobinda Phukan contributed towards the improvement of women's education as a measure of social reform.²⁹ Gongagobinda Phukan established a girls' school at Sibsagar in 1870. But the response of the local people belonging to higher castes towards the opening of the school was very poor. Only a few girls of the lower castes attended this school. Later, another school was opened for the education of the girls of the higher castes. Phukan's wife daughters and cousin sisters had English education at Calcutta. His wife Bidyutprova was the first Assamese women to receive English education in 1870.³⁰

The following table with the statistics of the number of girls' schools and the number of girl students during the period from 1870 to 1873 will give a picture of the level of women education in Assam of that period.

Districts	No. of Girls Schools			No. of Girls students		
	1870-71	1871-72	1872-73	1870-71	1871-72	1872-73
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Kamrup	4	—	—	61	—	—
Darrang	2	3	3	17	37	47
Nowgong	1	1	—	18	16	—
Sibsagar	4	2	3	53	22	46
Lakhimpur	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goalpara	2	2	1	40	28	22
	13	7	7	189	103	115

Source : A Statistical Account of Assam, Vols. I & II.

The efforts of these Assamese intellectuals, who came in contact with the Bengal Renaissance, succeeded in popularizing widow remarriage and in discouraging child marriage, dowry and bride price ('*kanya dhan*' or '*ga-dhan*') systems to a limited extent only. The influence of these reforms did not penetrate deep into the society of the common masses³¹ and the condition of the women did not show any improvement.

By the early years of the present century, the awakening of Indian women crystallized into a definite women's movement. The period between 1904 to 1918 was of great importance in the history of Indian Women's Movement. The process of their emancipation through participation in sociopolitical life was accelerated during this period.³²

Annie Besant, an Irish lady, who came to India in 1893 and made her home here, took up the cause for an organized

movement for the emancipation of women and for their political rights. Another western lady, Margaret Cousins who came to India in 1915 played a significant role in that direction. A noteworthy contribution of Cousins was the 'Vote for Women' movement of 1917 conducted in association with Sarojini Naidu and others.³³

A few all-India women organizations with programmes for the advancement of Indian women were formed during this period. The first such organization was the Bharat Mahila Parishad founded in the year 1904. Six years later at the initiative of Sarala Devi Choudhurani another national women organization, viz., Bharat Stri Mahamandal was established in 1910. A major step in the women's movement was the formation of the Women's Indian Association in 1917 at the initiative of Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinardasa (an European lady) to mention a few amongst many. This association had its headquarters in Madras with branches in as many as 43 different places of India.³⁴

None of the above associations had any branch in Assam. But the need for some women's organization in the province was felt by the women of Assam themselves. Five years after the Bharat Stri Mahamandal was formed, the first ever women's organization of Assam came into being in Dibrugarh in 1915 by the name Dibrugarh Habila Samiti. The initiative in the formation of this Samiti was taken by Hema prova Das and a few other women of Dibrugarh. The women of Nowgong formed a similar association in 1917. Following the examples of Dibrugarh and Nowgong, Mahila Samitis were formed in different parts of Assam. The aims and objectives of these *Samitis* were mainly socio-cultural, and to mention the more

important of them were women's education, removal of *pardah* system (*Oroni*) and child welfare. As the women of Assam did not have a provincial organization of their own till 1926, they used the platforms of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian (Assam Students Association) and the Asom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) for the upliftment of the position of women. Women like Lakhmiprova Chaliha, Chandrakanti Das and Chandraprova Saikiani, in their capacity as students, were the first to attend the Asom Chatra Sanmilian session at Tezpur in 1918. In the subsequent period, through these all-Assam organizations and the local Mahila Samitis the women leaders of Assam did participate in various socio-political activities till the all Asam Mahila Samiti was formed in 1926.³⁵

But the women organizations, wherever they were formed during this period, were small in size and elitist in composition with their members drawn from the urban families involved in associational politics. The effort for mass mobilization among the rural women was still a far cry.

The most important event in the history of emancipation of women in India was the emergence of Gandhiji in Indian politics with his concept and technique of *Satyagraha* as a means of attaining independence for India. His message that both sexes have equal rights and that women are superior to men attracted the common women towards the national political life in a very considerable way. From his experiences in South Africa, he became fully aware of the potentialities of women as *Satyagrahis*.³⁶ He wanted the utmost freedom for the Indian women,³⁷ and vehemently opposed the unjust social customs. Gandhiji inspired the women to think and decide independently instead of depending on man. He insisted on the involvement

of women in social and political activities. Women's upliftment was considered by Gandhi as an integral part of the freedom movement.³⁸ Gandhi's emergence and his call to the women gave them a new hope, an inspiration and a strength to fight equally with men for the independence of the country. For the simple, illiterate and innocent rural Assamese women he was God's incarnation on earth. A new age was ushered in for the Indian women.

In the meantime the Indian National Congress also became committed to improve the condition of women. The British found the Indian women tradition-bound, religious and subservient. They described the environment in which the Indian women had to live as oppressive. On the pretext of the backwardness of women and the society as such, the British opinion was also adverse to granting of political freedom to India³⁹. As such, upliftment of women became more important from political standpoint than from the social point of view. The Congress, therefore, adopted the principle of including women in every programme they launched and it resolved in 1918 that sex should not be a disqualification for women to enjoy political rights.⁴⁰ This approach of the Congress drew more and more women from all sections of the Indian people to its fold. From the point of view of large scale participation and sacrifice of women throughout India in different phases of the freedom movement from 1921 onwards, it can be said that it was the spirit of liberation from old conservatism that provided them with the courage to fight for the motherland.

Political background :

After almost six centuries of Ahom rule, Assam finally came

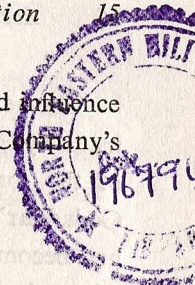
under the rule of the British as a result of the Treaty of Yandaboo that was concluded between the British East India Company and the Burmese on 24 February, 1826. According to the terms of the Treaty (Art. 2), the Burmese withdrew their claims over Assam and other neighbouring areas.

The inhabitants of Assam got relief from the Burmese atrocities through the intervention of the British East India Company ; but it did not take much time for them to realise that their next enemy was coming in the guise of the protector.⁴¹ Contrary to the expectations of the people of Assam and the commitment of the British, that an Ahom prince would be restored to the throne after the expulsion of the Burmese from Assam, the British gradually extended their rule over Assam under one pretext or another. They took advantage of the dissensions prevailing among the Ahom princes and in the name of better and stable administration and welfare of the people, the whole of Assam was brought under British occupation on the ground of their right of conquest from the Burmese⁴².

David Scott, the first British political agent in the North East was, however, aware of the local sentiments. He believed that the people of Assam would not easily submit to foreign rule after such a long period of independence which they enjoyed under the Ahoms. Accordingly, Scott proposed to the Calcutta Council on 2 February 1828 that a native monarchy in Assam be established in conformity with their earlier promises⁴³. He suggested to the authority to initially annex the western part of Assam (lower Assam) to the British India territory. Accordingly, this part of Assam came under the British rule in March 1828⁴⁴. But with regard to the first suggestion, the British authorities showed no inclination to

restore the native monarchy and before Scott could influence the former in this regard, attempts to overthrow the Company's rule had begun in Assam.⁴⁵

The first rebellion against British rule was brought about in the month of October 1828. A group of nobles headed by Dhanjoy Borgohain took up the cause of Gomdhar, a scion of the royal family, for the latter's installation to the Ahom throne. In a determined bid, Gomdhar was installed on the throne by the rebel nobles at a place near Jorhat. They performed all the royal formalities and proclaimed Gomdhar as the *Swargadeo*, i.e. the king. The common people were asked to acknowledge the *Swargadeo* and to abstain from paying revenue to the British collectors⁴⁶. With the intention of driving out the British and of taking back the Ahom capital Rangpur, Dhanjoy Borgohain and his men advanced towards it in November 1828. This plan was made on the basis of the information that British troops had been withdrawn from there. But this first-ever plan to throw out the British failed for the lack of proper organisation and co-ordination amongst the supporters of Assam's cause and under-estimation of the strength of East India Company. Dhanjoy Borgohain and his son were arrested. Gomdhar escaped ; but his mother and sisters were arrested for interrogation. They were the first Assamese women to be arrested by the British for political reasons. The Queen mother was pressurized to prevail upon her son for voluntary surrender. It is not known whether the old lady agreed to Rutherford's proposal or not⁴⁷. But after roaming alone over the jungle for about 12 days, Gomdhar surrendered and was put into jail. Later Dhanjoy Borgohain and Gomdhar both managed to escape from the jail.



The next attempt to drive out the British from Assam was made by Eyang Goomendao alias Godadhar Singha, a kinsman of the former Ahom King Jogeswar Singha, based in Burma. Godadhar's sister, who was given in marriage to a Burmese prince, had become interested in installing one of her brothers on the Ahom throne. She sent Godadhar to Assam in 1830 to organize a revolt against the British. But Godadhar was arrested by the British troops and thus the second attempt to drive out the British from Assam was nipped in the bud. However, this incident caused serious anxiety to the British East India Company.

Dhanjoy Borgohain who escaped from jail after the first revolt, made the third attempt for restoration of Ahom monarchy again in August 1830.⁴⁸ This time the attempt was better organized than the earlier ones. Important personalities such as Jeuram Dihingia Baruah, Peali Borphukan (son of Badan Chandra Borphukan, the former Ahom Viceroy), Jeuram Dulia Baruah, Krishnanath, Boom Singhpho and several others joined the Borgohain for the elevation of Roopchand Konwar, another Ahom prince, to the throne.⁴⁹ They secretly contacted the chiefs of the Moamarias, the Khampties, the Singphos, the Garos and the Nagas and succeeded in enlisting the support of some of them.

Accordingly, a two-fold plan of attack was organized. First to set fire to the Gun powder magazine⁵⁰ and the *Sipahi* lines⁵¹ and, second, to attack the British forces at Rangpur. While the first part of the plan was successfully accomplished, the second part failed. On 25 March 1830, a group of rebels numbering not less than 400 proceeded to attack the post at Rangpur; but after a small encounter at Geleki (on way to Rangpur) the rebels were crushed and most of the leaders with their wives and

children were arrested.⁵² The arrested persons were sentenced to long term banishment and punished with confiscation of property. Jeuram Dulia Barua and Peali Bar Phukan were sentenced to death. There were hanged at Sibsagar in August 1830.⁵³

Although these anti-British uprisings in Assam, during the period from 1828 to 1830 were defeated consecutively for three times, Yet they left behind ample sources for inspiration to the succeeding generations to fight for freedom from foreign rule.

The respected Uprisings in Assam compelled the authorities in Calcutta to revive the proposal of David Scott for installing an Ahom prince in Upper Assam. Lord Bentinck, the Governor General, also realized that a monarchy which had lasted for such a long time must be 'intrinsically good and ought to be restored'.⁵⁴ Accordingly, by an order issued by the Governor General, an Ahom prince, Purandar Singha, was made the King of Upper Assam on 24 April 1833, on condition of payment of an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000 to the British East India Company. The Company, however, reserved the right to remove the king in case of his failure to pay the tribute or in the event of serious maladministration.

The burden of payment of the tribute became too heavy for Purandar Singha since it was fixed not on the basis of actual resources but on arbitrary assessment by the Company. Under such a situation, Purandar was bound to fail. The British, taking advantage of the plight of the king, deposed him in October 1838⁵⁵ on the ground of default in payment and maladministration. From that time, the whole of Assam became a non-Regulation province under the British administration.⁵⁶

Deposition of Purandar Singha caused mounting discontent particularly amongst the royal and the noble families. Members of these families found it difficult to reconcile themselves with the new administrative arrangement the policy of which was that everyone, whatever his position, would have to work for his livelihood. Naturally they became agitated and looked for someone to lead them to fight against the alien rulers.⁵⁷

At this critical juncture, Maniram Dewan, a man of indomitable energy and courage, came on the scene to champion the cause of the Assamese nobility and common people. The Dewan was an employee of the company before he became the Counsellor of Purandar Singha. Maniram Dewan saw the dishonesty of the British during the period of his association with them and realized the worries and miseries of the people. He was convinced that the native people could not expect justice from the alien rulers and resolved to make an endeavour to restore the former government.

In the meantime Purandar Singha died on October 1846⁵⁸. Maniram approached his son, Kameswar Singha, and asked him to assert his family claim for restoration of monarchy. But Kameswar showed no interest and died in 1851. However, Maniram succeeded in persuading Kandarpeswar, the minor son of Kameswar Singha, to fight for the cause. On Maniram Dewan's advice, Kandarpeswar petitioned A. J. Moffatt Mills, the Judge of the Sadar Dewani Adalat, when the latter came to Sibsagar in June 1858, asking for restoration of Upper Assam to him on a tributary basis. But Mills rejected the petition because Kandarpeswar Singha was not considered eligible⁵⁹.

Maniram Dewan himself submitted two separate petitions to Moffatt Mills. In one of the petitions he pointed out the

faults and misdeeds of the British administration in Assam and asked the authority to restore Upper Assam to Chandrakanta Singha, another Ahom prince. In the other petition, he asked the Government for some favour to him-self in recognition of his long and loyal services under the British. But Moffatt Mills rejected both the petitions for he had, in fact, no difficulty in understanding the anti-British attitude of Maniram Dewan⁶⁰.

The 1857 Rebellion :

Maniram Dewan was sincerely convinced that without restoration of the Ahom Administration, there was no future for the people of Assam. What Maniram was really interested in, was the revival of traditional customs and institutions of the Assamese society by restoring the traditional political institution. Failing in his attempt to convince Moffatt Mills, Maniram decided to go to Calcutta to plead the case for restoration of Ahom monarchy before the East India Company. He submitted a petition to the Calcutta authorities on 6 May 1857. But his prayers and entreaties produced no result. A disappointed Maniram then looked to other means to accomplish his goal.

In the 1857 uprising of the Sepoys beginning in Meerut, Maniram Dewan found a bright ray of hope. The messages of Khan Bahadur Khan, Nava Saheb, Tantia Topi and other leading protagonists of the Rebellion of 1857 were relayed practically throughout the country. A copy of the *Istahar* (Manifesto) circulated by Bahadur Shah, the then Emperor of Delhi, was passed on to Maniram Dewan. The *Istahar* inspired Maniram with a new urge of patriotism. Maniram decided to transmit this spirit of national awakening to the people of Assam.

Based at Calcutta, he communicated to Kandarpeswar Singha, Peali Barua, the *Gossain* of Kamalabari *Satra*, Madhuram Koch, Chitrasen Barbor, Morongikhowa Gohain and few other persons in Assam and asked them to win over the Sepoys of the British Indian troops stationed at Dibrugarh and Golaghat⁶¹. Instructions continued to come from Maniram and accordingly preparations were made in Assam to launch an attack on the Britishers in Upper Assam. The attack was planned for the months of September and October 1857, immediately after the scheduled arrival of Maniram Dewan from Calcutta with arms and ammunitions. Captain Holroyd, the Principal Assistant Commissioner, was one of the prime targets of the rebels. They planned to enthrone Kandarpeswar Singha after eliminating the East India Company from Assam.

But, unfortunately the whole plan was betrayed with the wrong delivery of a letter meant for Kandarpeswar Singha to a British supporter, viz., Haranath Parbatia Barua. This proved disastrous to the cause of the Rebellion in Assam. Capt. Holroyd, with Haranath and Umed Munchi, made vigorous searches to unearth the whole plan. Soon a number of mutinous journals and bulletins, Maniram Dewan's letters which were like the *Istahars* of revolt in Assam, were recovered. On 9 September 1857, Kandarpeswar Singha's palace was raided late at night and he was arrested along with the members of his family. A large number of letters and secret papers, valuables and a large quantity of arms and ammunitions were seized from his palace. Peali Barua, alias Mahesh Chandra Barua and Madhu Mullick (a Bengali Muktiar), the important associates of the prince, were also found in the palace and arrested.

The arrest of the king and his two associates was followed

by the arrest of Mayaram Nazir, Dutiram Barua, Bahadur Gaonburah, Sheikh Formed Ali and many others. Maniram was arrested in Calcutta on 31 December 1857 and was taken to Jorhat for trial⁶².

Captain Holroyd was appointed the Special Commissioner under Act 14 of 1857 to try the conspiracy cases. Peali Barua and Maniram Dewan were tried on 9 and 23 February 1858 respectively and were found guilty of treason. Both of them were hanged publicly on 26 February 1858 at Jorhat. Other convicts were sentenced to either various terms of rigorous imprisonment, transportation for life, or, externment. Kandarpeswar Singha was interned. Two women from the royal families, viz., Rupahi Aideu and Lumbai Aideu suffered confiscation of property because of their alleged involvement in the conspiracy for the Rebellion. Rupahi and Lumbai, along with the female members of Kandarpeswar Singha's family, were the first Assamese women to suffer in the hands of the British for a national cause. Persons suspected to be supporters and sympathisers of the rebels were also arrested and punished. The mutinous sepoys of Dibrugarh were arrested and court-martialled. Many were sentenced to transportation for life, while others had to undergo long term imprisonment. At Golaghat, the sepoys who showed signs of rebellion or were suspected to be having link with the rebels were dismissed from service.⁶³

Post-Mutiny Agrarian uprisings :

The immediate effect of 1857 rebellion was the taking over of the Indian administration by the British Government from the East India Company. In order to overcome the

economic crisis caused by the Rebellion, the Government took various measures to realise every possible tax from the Indian people and most of the taxes were also extended to Assam. Assam was made to groan under the economic oppression of the British for the last decades of the 19th century. Barooah writes.⁶⁴

"While the rebellion bequeathed the anti-imperialist character of the movement, at the same time it assumed the inevitable anti-feudal characteristics. Struggle against exploitation and for land entered the countryside".

In fact, Assam saw in this period the outbreak of a series of agrarian revolts of historic importance, and these were also contributory causes for the development of nationalism and anti-British feelings in Assam.

The post-Mutiny developments in Assam were marked by the formation of a number of *Raij mels* (assemblies of the countryside people) throughout the province for ventilating the local grievances and moulding public opinion against the British. The immediate object of the *Raij mels* was to resist imposition of new taxes and enhancement of land revenue. They opposed the Government actions and demanded withdrawal of Government orders which in their opinion might lead to impoverishment of agriculture-based local economy.

Phulaguri Dhawa ;

The first important agrarian revolt after 1857 took place at Phulaguri, a place near Nagaon town. The ban on poppy cultivation had badly affected the economy of the people of

the district of Nagaon which was the largest poppy producing district. This was further aggravated by the Government proposal of a tax on betel nut. These led to an uprising of far reaching consequences at Phulaguri. On 17 September 1861, a group of peaceful demonstrators consisting of about 1500 people of Phulaguri area submitted a petition to Herbert Sconce, the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon praying exemption from the payment of taxes on the above commodities. But the British officer, instead of listening to the demonstrators, reacted in a provocative manner. At this, the villagers became enraged and were determined to fight it out. The zeal and devotion of the Phulaguri villagers was demonstrated by the fact that a section of the village population took an oath in a '*Hom Sabha*'—a sacrificial ceremony of the fire to lay down their lives for the cause of their country⁶⁵.

On 9 October 1861, another peaceful protest was made by the people of Phulaguri against the ban of poppy cultivation and imposition of betel nut tax but without any result whatsoever. Failing to impress the Government, the people decided to bring their cause to the notice of the former by way of non-payment of taxes.⁶⁶ The decision for non-payment of taxes by the people of a part of Assam in 1861, may be regarded as the beginning of non-violent non-cooperation long before such a method was formally adopted as a part of the Freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in 1920-21.

For the purpose of giving adequate publicity and to mobilize popular support for the no-tax campaign, a five-day convention was held at Phulaguri from 15 to 19 October 1861. On the first day some 1500 people attended the meeting and

the number rose to about 4000 towards the last day. The District authorities made many attempts on the first three days to prevent the holding of the assembly and to disperse it, but without any success. On the last day of the meeting, the Assistant Commissioner of Nagaon, Lt. Singer and three other constables were killed in a direct clash with the people. Killing and arson spread to the nearby areas. Later, 41 persons, allegedly involved in the incident, were arrested; but the persons who actually killed Singer and the police constables, namely Raghu and Sangbar, escaped arrest. At this the crowd reassembled again to free the arrested persons from the police custody. The police then opened fire on the crowd, causing 35 deaths while 15 others later succumbed to their injuries. This was followed by inhuman atrocities committed on the people of the area by the police. Being unable to bear the sufferings of the people, Raghu Singh and Sangbar Lalung surrendered to the police and confessed their involvement in the killing of Singer and the police constables. They were sentenced to death and hanged in the Nagaon jail.⁶⁷ Other arrested persons were sentenced either to transportation for life or long term of imprisonment.

Thus the Phulaguri uprising was suppressed through police brutalities ; but heroic popular resistance against the anti-people actions of the Government remained a source of inspiration in the minds of the people. The episode, called *Phulaguri Dhawa* (Battle of Phulaguri), is still talked of by the people ; and the living grandchildren of the participants of the Dhawa narrate the heroic participation of their grandfathers and the atrocities the people had to suffer in the hands of the British.⁶⁸

The Phulaguri uprising was basically a peasant rebellion.

But it was in fact more than that. It bore testimony to the people's striving to liberate themselves from the bondage of alien exploitation. This uprising was the first popular movement in Assam after 1857. But unfortunately, even such a great uprising did not receive the proper attention partly for the lack of communication and publicity and partly for the hiding of facts by the Government. There was a complete news blackout in Assam at that time.⁶⁹ The attempt by British writers to describe the incident as an opium eaters' stir was nothing but a deliberate attempt to distort history.⁷⁰

Other Peasant uprisings :

In fulfilment of its tax enhancement policy, the British Government increased land revenue by 25% to 50% in 1865 causing serious resentment among the peasantry. The Ryots, i. e., the peasants, of Patharughat in the district of Darrang were the first to react to the 1865 revenue rise. A huge protest demonstration of Hindus and Muslims of Patherughat was organized in 1868 against the Government's revenue policy.⁷¹ The Patharughat type of demonstration was followed by the people of many places of the districts of Kamrup and Lakhimpur. The people of Lakhimpur district displayed a novel technique of non-cooperation with the Government. As a token of protest against the enhancement of taxes and revenue, they surrendered their plots of land to the Government. This badly affected the revenue collection.⁷² In the early part of 1869 *Raij mels* were held in different places of Assam, viz., Gobindapur, Harida, Bazali, and many other places. But their success remained limited to the raising of protests and opposition to Government policies only.⁷³

Another increase in taxes was announced by the Govern-

ment in 1892 against which the people of Rangia, Lachima, Patharughat, Pati Darrang and many other places raised their voice of protest in a more organized manner. *Raij mels* were held in those places and a 'no tax' campaign was launched. They resolved not only to abstain from paying taxes but also to take stern action against those who cooperated with the Government in any way. Stray incidents of burning of Government buildings, beating of Government supporters and servants and ex-communication of the supporters of the Government took place in these areas. But the repressive measures of the Government continued unabated. One such measure was the prohibition of the holding of the *Raij mels* in Pati Darrang. Rangia, Nalbari, Tamulpur, Hazo, Barama, Bajali and Sarukhetri areas. Some of these places were declared disturbed areas. Many people were arrested. The Government adopted every repressive measures to suppress these uprisings but the people were not to be cowed down to surrender.

Patharughatar Ran (1894) :

In India's struggle for freedom from British rule the people of Patharughat created history in the last decade of the 19th century by demonstrating their indomitable courage and determination. On 27 January 1894, J. D. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang district, accompanied by a group of police under Lt. Berrington went to Patharughat in order to collect the outstanding revenue from the defaulting peasants of the village. But the people of the village were determined to resist it. A mass demonstration was held in front of the Deputy Commissioner's camp in the village to protest against the forcible collection of the enhanced revenue. The police opened fire on the crowd causing many deaths and injuries. According to the Government statement only 17 people died ;

but unofficial public reports but the figure at 140 belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities. The number of persons who were injured was very large. Names of 23 martyrs collected from the public memory are found in the '*Doli Puran*', a verse composition by Norottom. The Patharughat battle was known as the *Doli Ran* (the battle of earth clods). As the village people in that battle were unarmed, they had to fight against the bullets and bayonets of the British force with whatever was handy at the moment. They fought by throwing the dried earth clods, i. e., *Dolis*, from the field at the police and thus the battle came to be known as the *Doli Ran*.⁷⁴

The peasant rebellions that broke out in different places of Assam during this period give a clear indication of the indomitable mental preparedness on the part of the rural masses for even a greater struggle. Further, these uprisings, particularly that of Patharughat, were brilliant manifestations of Hindu-Muslim amity in Assam. Although the Patharughat and other rebellions were primarily protests against tax enhancement, these promoted the growth of Nationalism in the rural masses of Assam. Barooah writes : "The renaissance movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, the series of agrarian outbreaks during the last four decades of the same century,—all these contributed to the growth of a conscious national movement for freedom from and independence of foreign rule".⁷⁵

Nationalism in Assam :

The spirit of nationalism in Assam, in fact, germinated almost simultaneously with the establishment of British rule in Assam. The people of Assam could not reconcile themselves to the emergence of the British as a ruling power from the very beginning. The infiltration of the Bengali elements to replace

the Assamese at different levels of the administration in the name of efficient and better administration and the introduction, in 1837, of the Bengali language displacing Assamese caused great dissatisfaction among the Assamese people. A group of educated Assamese youths, namely, Anundaram Dhekial Phukan and some others emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century ; and there grew among them a feeling of nationalism as well as language consciousness in reaction to the imposition of Bengali. The publication in 1846, of *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese newspaper brought out by American Missionaries contributed greatly towards the growth of the language consciousness among the Assamese elites. The case of the persecuted Assamese language was first brought to the notice of Moffatt Mills by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan through a memorandum submitted in the year 1853.⁷⁶ In 1872, the Assamese Literary Society was formed at Calcutta at the initiative of the Assamese living there. On behalf of the society, J. N. Baruah and N. C. Barua drew the attention of Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy of India, to the potential resources of Assam through a memorial submitted to him on 21 May 1872. It was through the efforts of Anundaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah and Hem-chandra Barua that Assamese language was recognised for use in the courts and schools of Assam from 1873.

Though the 1857 developments in Assam appeared as attempts at installing a native prince, it was very much in conformity with the plans and programmes of the nascent nationalism of the day elsewhere in the country. Maniram Dewan and Piali Baruah became the martyrs for the cause of the country. Their martyrdom also left behind an unmeasurable source of inspiration for the succeeding generations to fight for the country's independence.⁷⁷ All these developments reflect the

advance of nationalism in the Brahmaputra valley till the ninth decade of the nineteenth century.

Ryot Sabhas :

The repression of the peasant rebellions led to important changes in the technique of expressing popular grievances in Assam. Several associations and *sabhas* of socio-political and socio-cultural nature were brought into being in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, with a view to uniting the people of Assam in the spirit of patriotism. Such association viz. the Upper Assam Association, the Asam Desh Hitaisini Sabha, the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Tezpur Ryot Sabha and the Nowgong Ryot Sabha were formed in the years 1885-86. They sought to provide organized leadership in the popular movements for the redress of public grievances. Other objectives of the Sabhas were to keep the people informed of the programmes and policies of the Government and to keep them ever ready to stand against any Government policy that appeared to be detrimental to the interests of the people, to resist enhancement or fresh levy of taxes and to take measures for the cultural amelioration of the people of Assam. These associations also offered practical suggestions to be Government to solve the problems of Assam. In 1892, the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, for example, suggested gradual abolition of opium-eating instead of an abrupt prohibition, pleaded for recruitment of native Assamese people to the Government offices and for allotment of a permanent seat to Assam in the Indian Legislative Council.

These voluntary associations served as useful platforms for arousing political consciousness and the spirit of nationalism among the people of Assam. As their jurisdiction was limited

to their respective localities only, the need for an all-Assam organization of the same nature was seriously felt in the last decade of the nineteenth century. An association by the name of 'Assam Association' was formed by a section of the Assamese middle class in 1882 with its headquarters at Sibsagar.⁷⁸ But this association could not function properly and remained defunct until it was reconstituted in 1903. We have chosen to recount the circumstances of nationalist beginning in Assam if only to serve as a necessary preface to our study in the right perspective.

In December 1883 the first National Conference of India was held in Calcutta at the initiative of the Indian Association with a view to forming an all-India political organisation.

Assam in the National mainstream :

The inaugural session of the Indian National Congress was held in Bombay in 1885. The foundation of the National Congress proclaimed a new era—an era of the beginning of political unity with a new perspective. This session was, in fact, a meeting of volunteers only. Seventytwo volunteers from different parts of India attended the meeting⁷⁹. Lakhikanta Barkakati, the founder member of the Tezpur Ryot Sabha, was the only member from Assam to attend the session.⁸⁰ But good wishes were conveyed by different individuals from Assam and they welcomed the idea of forming the National Congress. While the first National Congress aroused the consciousness of the people, the second session held at Calcutta in 1886 marked a distinct advance in respect of attendance⁸¹. In this session as many as 434 delegates participated. Assam was represented by Kalikanta Barkakati, Devicharan Barua, Gopinath Bordoloi (Dibrugarh) and Satyanath Bora.⁸² There were obviously no

women delegates from Assam. Since then Assam was represented at most of the sessions of the National Congress held at different places. But in the absence of any provincial organization, the delegates from Assam were represented by some organizations and associations such as the Upper Assam Association, Nowgong Ryot Association, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Tezpur Ryot Sabha and others⁸³.

Assam Association :

As mentioned earlier, a provincial organization known as the 'Assam Association' was formed at Sibsagar in 1882 but it soon became defunct. The Association was revived again in 1903 by a few members of the Assamese elites such as Manik Chandra Barua, Jagannath Barua, Faiznur Ali, Prabhat Chandra Barua, Ghanashyam Barua and others. The first formal session of the revived association was held at Dibrugarh in 1905⁸⁴.

The Assam Association in its formative stage could not meet in regular sessions except for occasional sittings to discuss important matters as and when necessary. But it remained alert to all provincial and national issues. The Association had to play an important role in the dispute over the Partition of Bengal and amalgamation of Assam with Eastern Bengal which action of the Government was greatly resented by all sections. In 1907, a memorandum signed by Manik Chandra Barua and some others of the Association was submitted to the Secretary of State, for separation of Assam from Eastern Bengal and for placing Assam under a commissioner as separate province. The memorandum also stated that the already deteriorating condition of Assam had been aggravated further

by its amalgamation with the districts of Eastern Bengal. But the effort did not produce any result.

In 1908, Manik Chandra Baruah was elected to the Council of East Bengal and Assam. In the Council, Baruah openly placed before it the miseries that Assam had been facing since her amalgamation with East Bengal. He pleaded there that this action of the Government was a great cultural and economic threat to the people of Assam. In his speech to the Council in 1909 he demanded exclusive rights for the 'children of the soil' to the public services, spread of higher education and the development of agriculture, industry and communication in Assam⁸⁵.

From 1905 to 1911, the Assam Association prepared the ground for a national forum for the people of Assam. It did not lag behind in reacting to any political thought or movement that appeared on the Indian scene and led Assam to fight for the cause of the Nation⁸⁶.

In 1912, Assam regained the provincial status and she became a Chief Commissioner's province with the Legislative Council at Shillong. The people of Assam hailed the decision of the Government. The Assam Legislative Council had a total strength of 25 members. Manik Chandra Barua, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Tarunram Phukan, Ghanashyam Barua, Mahammad Sadullah, Prabhat Chandra Baruah were the Assamese members in the Council. Fourteen of the members were nominated official members. Interestingly, the nominated members in the Council from the Assam Association, like Padmanath Gohain Baruah used to criticise the Government and its policies. As a matter of fact, the members in the

Council belonging to the Brahmaputra Valley were largely guided by the resolutions passed from time to time by the Assam Association⁸⁷.

The Assam Association was always opposed to communalism. In the 1917 Calcutta Congress, the representatives of the Association expressed their firm resolve to stand for national unity and integrity as against the sectional and communal interest of some such contemporary associations of Assam⁸⁸.

In 1918, the Assam Association strongly pleaded the case for the status of a major province for Assam. A year later, a two-member delegation was sent to London to give evidence before the Selbourne Committee of the House of Lords. The delegation succeeded in obtaining the status of a full-fledged Governor's province for Assam in December 1919. Through the year 1919, the tragedy of Jallianwalabagh, adoption of the Rowlatt Act and other Black laws, the Khilafat wrongs and betrayal by the British Government brought the Assam Association closer to the National Congress. It remained committed to the Congress policies on national issues. By 1920, the Assam Association was dissolved to pave the way for the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee with almost the same members.

In addition to the Assam Association, some other non-political and socio-cultural organisations like the Assam Chatra Sanmilan, Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Assam Mahila Samiti were formed for the improvement of the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people. But, later, these organizations played a significant role in the freedom movement and in the development of the spirit of nationalism in Assam.

Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Students' conference). It was in the eighth decade of the nineteenth century what some Assamese students studying in Calcutta came together to work for the development of Assamese literature. The first ever organization of Assamese students, viz., the Assamiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha (Society for advancement of Assamese language) was formed in 1888 at Calcutta by a group of Assamese students. The society opened its branches in most towns of Assam. The organisation of the Assamiya Bhasar, Unnati Sadhini Sabha was followed by the formation of the Assamese students Literary Clubs in Dacca and Gauhati. In 1905, another students' organisation known as the Ekata Sabha (Union society) was formed by students studying at Gauhati, mostly in Cotton College. The Assam students Literary Clubs and the Ekata Sabha, both interested in the social and literary upliftment of Assam, considered that formation of an all-Assam organization of the students was very essential. The Assamese students studying in Calcutta realised the urgent need for a provincial student organisation in Assam to work for the province and the nation in the light of the socio-political developments taking place in the light of the people. Thus came into being the Assam Chatra Sanmilan.

The Assam Chatra Sanmilan held its first conference in 1916 at Guwahati with Lakhinath Bezbaruah as its President. For a few years in the beginning, the Sanmilan functioned only as a socio-cultural body. But development on the national political scene drew the Assam Chatra Sanmilan to take more active interest in public issues. From 1921 onwards, the Sanmilan took active part in the freedom movement of India thereby increasing its strength and improving the organization. On certain issues the views of the Sanmilan were found to be in advance of those of the national political leaders. For example,

two years before the launching of the non-cooperation movement by Gandhiji in 1921, the Tezpur session of the Sanmilan in 1919 adopted a resolution to boycott foreign goods and promote the use of Swadeshi. The contribution of the Assamese students to the freedom movement throughout the whole period was remarkable.⁸⁹

Asam Mahila Samiti (Women's Association of Assam) :

The women of Assam started to organize themselves from the year 1915 onwards. In the beginning, the number of women's associations, known as the Mahila Samitis was small. These were formed independently in different places of Assam. The women of Dibrugarh were the first to organize a Samiti of their own. The main objective of these associations was the upliftment of the Assamese society, primarily of the women and children in respect of cultural, economic and educational matters. Their voluntary activities included education of the women to be self-reliant and improvement of their lot in social life. The Samitis also showed great interest in the constructive programme of Gandhiji which was used as a major tool of non-co-operation. Until 1926, the women of Assam were not organized at the provincial level; but they contributed tremendously to the freedom movement either through their local associations or individually. The Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti was formed in the year 1926, and the role played by it in the national political life was of great significance.

Asam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Association) :

The Asam Sahitya Sabha, established in 1917, was a cultural organization and came into being mainly for the development of Assamese language and literature. It ushered in a new era

of literary development in Assam. But, at the same time, through its publications and conferences it infused the spirit of nationalism in the minds of the people and influenced them in nationalist directions. The platform of the Sahitya Sabha was also used for political discussion by those members of the Sabha who were closely connected with national political activities. The Sahitya Sabha, from the beginning, was greatly concerned with the still unsettled question of the cultural and linguistic identity of the people of the Brahmaputra valley and their demand to get preferential treatment for the Assamese in employment. In spite of the prevailing Assamese-Bengali controversy that originated in the nineteenth century, the people of Assam were not averse to upholding the ideal of nationalism embracing the entire country along with promoting the cause of subnationalism. They did not lag behind in realising that British power must be driven out of India with the united efforts of all Indians.

1919—The Crucial Year :

Events in India in the year 1919 largely moulded the course of her history for the subsequent years. The most important events were, (1) the implementation of the Rowlatt Act which led to a reign of terror in the Punjab, the Jallianwalabagh massacre and the enforcement of martial law in Punjab, (2) the passing of the Government of India Act 1919 on the basis of the Montague Chelmsford Report ; (3) emergence of M. K. Gandhi to lead the people of India in the struggle for freedom and (4) the infusion of pan-Islamism as a force of Indian politics in the form of the Khilafat movement.⁹⁰ The issues merit a brief discussion in so far as Assam was involved in them.

The Government of India Act, 1919 :

The War presented an opportunity to India to rise in revolt and free herself from the British bondage. But, the Indian people showed great magnanimity by putting their men and material in the British war efforts in anticipation of a reciprocal gesture from the British government to grant Home Rule to India in appreciation of the help of her people.⁹¹ Supporting the Indian participation, Tilak said that every Indian should assist the British government to the best of his ability.⁹²

But to the utter dismay of the Indian people, the British Government instead of making provisions for self-government, planned to place India under the subjection of Dominion status.⁹³ The Indian leaders and the Congress as well criticised this plan. The Madras session of the congress held in December 1914 urged upon the British government to give India the recognition of a component part of the federated British empire.⁹⁴ i. e., the status of a self-governing state.

The Montague-Chelmsford report as constitutional reform was received in India with mixed feelings. While the moderate section in India expressed their satisfaction, Tilak and others regarded the scheme as entirely unacceptable. Annie Besant said "it was unworthy of England to offer it to India."⁹⁵ The Bombay Congress session of 1918 and the Muslim League reaffirmed their earlier stand and said that nothing less than self-government would satisfy the people of India.⁹⁶

The British Government was adamant and on the basis of the report, the Government of India Act 1919 was passed by the Parliament. The Government considered the Act as a 'gift' to India in recognition of the latter's help in the war. But the

Indians regarded it as an imposition and a 'smoke-screen' to hide the ultimate motive of the British.⁹⁷

The scheme provided for an enlarged legislature with a diarchy. It tried to create an impression on the mind of the international community that the British were generous. Sunderland observed—"this scheme which has been heralded abroad and praised as offering so much to India, and as setting her feet securely on the road to self rule particularly to Dominion status like that of Canada, as a matter of fact, gave her no assurance of being granted such a status or any form of self-determination, in a thousand years."⁹⁸

The Government of India Act fall short of Indian aspirations. But inspite of that, the Indian National Congress decided to work for the reform to put the first step towards establishment of a responsible government.⁹⁹

Before the adoption of the Government of India Act, 1919 Assam was a part of the province of Bengal and did not have an independent provincial status. She was also away from the mainstream of national politics.¹⁰⁰ On the eve of giving new administrative measures, Montague came to India to study the Indian political situation personally. A delegation consisting of Ghanashyam Baruah, Gonga Gobinda Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and a few others representing the Assam Association met Montague at Calcutta in December 1917. The delegation pleaded before him for granting Assam a full-fledged provincial status at par with other major provinces of India.¹⁰¹ But the Montague-Chelmsford report did not react favourably to this demand. The main opposition for inclusion of Assam in

the Redorm scheme came from the Chief Commissioner of Assam and Indian Tea Association. A few other sectarian and communal forces also worked against the reform proposals of the Assam Association¹⁰².

The Assam Association did not give up its efforts. It took a decision to send a one-man delegation with Nabin Chandra Bordoloi to represent Assam's case before the Parliamentary Committee constituted for finalizing the details of the reforms in Calcutta.¹⁰³ In his arguments, Bordoloi rejected all views against inclusion of Assam in the Reform scheme and asserted before the Parliamentary Committee that Assam was much more suited for representative government than any other province of India. But his efforts failed to change the position. The Montague-Chelmsford report published in December 1918. did not include Assam in its purview.

At this time, Indian leaders like Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Tez Bahadur Sapru, Sarojini Naidu and others were also there in London to present Indian's case as a whole. Tilak enquired from Bordoloi as to why Assam was going to accept the Reform when India wanted to stop its implementation. Bordoloi told him that initially it was for obtaining a major provincial status that they were fighting for, and in the event of getting the same Assam would definitely work in conformity with the Congress policies.¹⁰⁴ The national leaders understood the legitimacy of Assam's demand and they expressed their support and sympathy to it¹⁰⁵

Rowlatt Bills, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and Assam :

Lord Chelmsford who was known for adopting the policy of reform-cum-repression appointed the Sedition Committee

or the Rowlatt committee to have a thorough and careful inquiry into the nature and extent of criminal conspiracies connected with the revolutionary movement in India, in 1917. This committee was appointed at the time when the question of reform was considered by Chelmsford and Montague. On the basis of distorted and biased reports submitted by the Committee, the British Government took up two bills for consideration.¹⁰⁶ These bills sought to curb the individual liberty and empower the government to arrest, try, and detain any person merely on the grounds of suspicion of involvement in activities considered to be revolutionary in nature. Such a step of the British Government was regarded as an example of betrayal even after the invaluable help rendered by the Indians in the British war efforts.¹⁰⁷

In Assam, the resentment against the unilateral decision of the Government to introduce the Rowlatt Bills was first expressed through a public meeting held on 16 February 1919 at the Gauhati Public Hall under the presidentship of Tarun Ram Phukan. The meeting condemned the Government for ignoring the strong opposition of the Indian members of the Council and of the people in general. The meeting urged the Government to drop the Bill. A protest meeting was also held at Dibrugarh on 23 February under the presidentship of Faiznur Ali.¹⁰⁸ Following Gauhati and Dibrugarh, meetings were held in other places to express the popular resentment against the Rowlatt bill. The participation of Assam in the all-India anti-Rowlatt bill agitation in 1919 can be considered as one of the first direct involvements in an all-India movement.¹⁰⁹ Gandhiji described the Rowlatt bills as "an unmistakable symptom of deep-seated disease in the governing body".¹¹⁰ He appealed to the Viceroy not to give assent to the bills. But ignoring

Gandhi's appeal and the popular resentment, one of the two bills was passed by the Parliament on 18 March 1919.¹¹¹

Gandhiji decided to organize a *Satyagraha* in protest against the adoption of the Rowlatt Bill. Proposing the *Satyagraha*, Gandhi pledged, "we solemnly affirm that in the event of these Bills becoming Law and until they are withdrawn, we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws as to the Committee, hereafter to be appointed, may think fit, and we further affirm that in the struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person or property".¹¹² In reality, the implementation of the Rowlatt Act marked the beginning of a transformation of the Indian people from loyal citizens of the British Government to extreme rebels.¹¹³

The date for *Satyagraha*, to begin with a one-day token hartal, was fixed for 30 March 1919 originally. But subsequently, the date was changed to 6 April 1919. Since the information about the change of date did not reach all parts of the country, the hartals were observed peacefully in some places on 30 March, and on 6 April in others. The response of the people to this hartal was unprecedented, and this *Satyagraha* signaled the declaration of India's non-violent war against the British imperialism.¹¹⁴

But the post-hartal disturbances in different places and the event in the Punjab had electrified the Indian political scene. The Punjab administration under Michael O' Dwyer took different kinds of repressive measures on the agitationists. Local leaders like Satyapal and Kitchlu were arrested and deported. On 10 April 1919, following the arrest of these two leaders, people came out in processions. In Amritsar, police opened fire on two groups

of processionists and killed a large number of people. This was followed by indiscriminate arrests of persons on next two days.

On 13 April 1919, a black day in the Indian history, about 20,000 men, women and children assembled in the Jallianwala Bagh to celebrate the 'Baisakhi'—the Hindu new years day. But a prohibitory order on processions and meetings was already promulgated by the Dwyer administration on the day before. Many in the gathering were totally unaware of this order.¹¹⁵ Then, General Dwyer, with a big force, reached the meeting place and ordered to open fire on the crowd on the ground of violating prohibitory orders. This infamous massacre left 1200 dead and about 13,600 injured.¹¹⁶ It became more horrific from the next day with the rigorous enforcement of the curfew with a 'shoot at sight' order and followed by public flogging, arrests and imprisonment.¹¹⁷ Fiftyone people were sentenced to death.

The news about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was kept suppressed for some time. But when these news percolated to different parts of India, people became shocked and filled with distrust and hatred for the British Government.

Assam shared the grief of Jallianwala Bagh and the Punjab atrocities with the rest of India. Nabin Chandra Bordoloi who was moderate in views and had great faith on British liberalism, was shocked and disillusioned to see, after his return from London, the treachery committed by them in India. He said—“After I went to get Reforms, after I fought hard for the Reforms and after I had contributed something to get the reforms for Assam, I returned to India only to see the blood-stained field of Jallianwala Bagh and the callous indifference of our rullers. I travelled to that place—I walked on the field and

while there, I knelt down and said 'Oh God : if this is what has come out of our being partners of the same Empire, then save me from this Empire'.¹¹⁸ Tarun Ram Phukan and others also expressed their shock and grief when the news of this holocaust reached them.

Gandhi identified himself with the khilafat cause and found in the movement an important platform for Hindu-Muslim unity which he considered to be of great importance in the fight against the British.¹¹⁹ He advocated a non-violent non-co-operation movement against the Khilafat wrongs and the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The non-co-operation programme was to be executed by (a) resignation from honorary posts and returning the titles conferred by the British. (b) resignation from civil service, police and army and (c) refusal to pay taxes.¹²⁰ Gandhi announced that the movement would commence on 1 August 1920 ; and exactly on that date, Gandhi started it by returning all titles and decorations awarded to him by the British. While returning the medals, he wrote to Chelmsford—“I cannot wear them with an easy conscience so long as my Mussalman countrymen have to labour under a wrong done to their religious sentiment”.¹²¹

The Calcutta session of the Congress held in September 1920 fully endorsed the method of progressive non-violent non-co-operation as inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi.¹²² This movement was originally launched to get the redressal of the Punjab and the Khilafat wronge ; but later it was extended for demanding *Swarajjya* by a resolution adopted in the Nagpur session in December 1920.¹²³

The people of Assam, Hindus and Muslime alike, extended full support to the Khilafat movement. As directed by the

Central Khilafat Committee, 19 March 1920 was observed as the Khilafat mourning day by holding hartals and meetings. These meetings demanded *status quo ante* of the Turkish Sultanate. This day was observed in Gauhati, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Goalpara and North Lakhimpur.¹²⁴ Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Chandranath Sarma participated in the Gauhati Khilafat meetings.¹²⁵ Khilafat Committees were formed in different parts of Assam with local leaders and a provincial committee was formed at Gauhati.¹²⁶ The Khilafat movement in Assam, towards the end of 1920, adopted the issues of national movement like *Swarajya*, boycott of foreign goods, etc. A very significant contribution of the Khilafat was the reinforcement of Hindu-Muslim unity. It went deep into the minds of the people of Assam particularly in the rural areas and laid the foundation for a united movement in the subsequent years.¹²⁷

Emergence of Mahatma Gandhi :

After about 25 years of stay in South Africa, Gandhi came back to India in 1915. In South Africa he led a successful movement of the Indian settlers for the vindication of their national honour and human rights,¹²⁸ and his technique of strength was *Satyagraha*. After his return from South Africa, Gandhi identified himself with local issues at Kaira, Champaran and Ahmedabad in defence of the rights of the peasants and workers. It was only in 1919 that he made a bid for all-India leadership. He became the tallest of Indian leaders, the *Mahatma*, and thus began the Gandhi era in Indian politics. It was a great boon to Indian women as well, since it was Gandhi who more than anybody else, upheld with vigour the cause of Indian women and their emancipation.