

Echoes Of Valour: Unveiling The Unsung Women Freedom Fighters Of Assam And Their Enduring Legacy In India's Struggle For Independence

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Abstract

The history of India's anti-colonial struggle has long been dominated by narratives centred upon nationally prominent male leaders, organisational elites, and major metropolitan centres. Such narratives have often obscured the contribution of women whose political activities unfolded in provincial, rural, and community-based settings. Assam presents an especially important case for recovering these neglected histories. Women participated in the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India movements while simultaneously creating new forms of political association through women's organisations, vernacular print culture, constructive programmes, and local mobilisation. This article examines the participation of Assamese women in India's freedom struggle, with particular attention to Chandraprabha Saikiani, Pushpalata Das, Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Guneswari Devi, and Tileswari Barua. It argues that women's contribution should not be interpreted merely as an auxiliary component of male nationalist politics. Rather, women's political activity helped produce a new gendered public sphere in colonial Assam and expanded the social basis of nationalism. Drawing upon the regional historiography of Amalendu Guha and H. K. Barpujari, the wider historiography of Indian nationalism represented by Sumit Sarkar and Geraldine Forbes, and specialised studies by Dipti Sharma, Hemjyoti Medhi, Anil Kumar Sharma, Guptajit Pathak, and Akunthita Borthakur, the article demonstrates that the apparent marginality of these women is partly a consequence of historiographical selection. Their recovery therefore constitutes not simply an act of commemoration but a methodological intervention in the writing of Indian history. The article concludes that the enduring legacy of Assamese women freedom fighters lies in their transformation of nationalism into a participatory social practice and in their challenge to both colonial domination and restrictive gender norms.

Keywords: Assam, Women Freedom Fighters, Indian Nationalism, Quit India Movement, Gender History

Introduction:

The historiography of India's freedom movement has undergone substantial transformation during the last several decades. Early nationalist histories understandably emphasised political leadership, constitutional developments, and the sacrifices of celebrated patriots. Subsequent scholarship, however, demonstrated that the struggle against colonialism was also a mass social process involving peasants, workers, students, tribal communities, and women. Sumit Sarkar situates the development of mass nationalism within broader social and political transformations, providing an important framework for understanding how anti-colonial politics expanded beyond established political elites. (*Sumit Sarkar, pp. 165–253, 349–413*).

Women's history has added another important dimension. Geraldine Forbes demonstrates that women's participation in nationalism challenged the assumption that political action belonged exclusively to men. Women's entry into civil disobedience, nationalist organisations, and anti-colonial activism created new possibilities for female political identity. (*Geraldine Forbes, pp. 121–156*).

Within this wider historiography, Assam remains comparatively underrepresented. Amalendu Guha's *Planter-Raj to Swaraj* remains fundamental to understanding Assam's political development between British annexation and independence. Guha connects the emergence of nationalism with plantation capitalism, agrarian relations, political organisation, electoral politics, and the development of the Congress in Assam. (*Amalendu Guha, pp. 1–392*).

H. K. Barpujari's extensive work on the political history of Assam similarly demonstrates that the development of nationalism in the province cannot be separated from its distinctive regional political and social circumstances. This is where the scholarship of Dipti Sharma and, more recently, Hemjyoti Medhi becomes particularly significant. Sharma's *Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle* remains one of the most substantial studies of women's participation in Assam between 1921 and 1947. (*Dipti Sharma, pp. 91–296*).

Medhi's *Gendered Publics: Chandraprava Saikiani and the Mahila Samiti in Colonial Assam* provides a significant feminist reinterpretation. Its introduction places the Assam Mahila Samiti within the changing political and vernacular public sphere of colonial Assam. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 1–39*).

This article advances three propositions. First, Assamese women's political participation preceded 1942 and developed through several phases of nationalist mobilisation. Second, women were not merely "helpers" of male nationalism but political actors who created organisational and cultural spaces of their own. Third, the historical invisibility of women such as Guneswari Devi, Bhogeswari Phukanani, and numerous local activists reflects the limitations of conventional political history rather than the insignificance of their contributions.

Colonial Assam and the Emergence of Women's Political Consciousness:

The incorporation of Assam into British India after 1826 fundamentally altered the region's political economy and social institutions. Plantation capitalism, administrative restructuring, migration, new educational institutions, and the development of print culture contributed to the emergence of a modern political consciousness. Amalendu Guha demonstrates that the transition from "planter raj" to "swaraj" involved complex interactions among colonial interests, peasants, workers, middle-class political groups, and the Congress. (*Amalendu Guha, pp. 1–392*).

Women entered this changing political environment through education, social reform, literary activity, and voluntary organisations. The establishment of the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926 was particularly important. Hemjyoti Medhi demonstrates that the organisation became a significant institutional space through which women participated in public speaking, social reform, political mobilisation, and collective

activities. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 1–39*).

The political significance of Chandraprabha Saikiani therefore extends well beyond her own biography. As a leading organiser of the Assam Mahila Samiti, she helped transform women from objects of social reform into subjects of political action. Medhi's analysis is particularly important because it does not treat the public sphere as a neutral space into which women simply entered. Instead, women's collectives themselves helped produce and transform a gendered public. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 237–251*).

From Non-Cooperation to Civil Disobedience:

The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22 marked an important turning point. Gandhi's emphasis on constructive work, khadi, boycott, and mass participation provided women with legitimate avenues for political engagement. Assamese women participated in spinning, weaving, picketing, and nationalist propaganda, while women's organisations helped translate national political programmes into local social practices.

Dipti Sharma documents women's participation throughout the different phases of the freedom struggle rather than treating 1942 as an isolated moment. Her study covers the Assam Mahila Samiti, picketing, political processions, satyagraha, spinning and weaving, and women activists associated with the 1942 movement. (*Dipti Sharma, pp. 91–176, 177–296*).

The Civil Disobedience Movement further expanded women's political participation. Women participated in demonstrations, boycott campaigns, and constructive programmes. This participation was historically significant because it altered accepted boundaries of respectable femininity.

The Assamese experience also illustrates that women's political mobilisation did not arise entirely from modern nationalist organisations. Hemjyoti Medhi demonstrates how women's earlier religious, cultural, and literary practices could become part of new forms of public self-expression. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 82–114*).

Chandraprabha Saikiani and the Creation of a Gendered Public Sphere:

Chandraprabha Saikiani deserves particular attention because her contribution demonstrates the intersection between nationalism, feminism, and social reform. Saikiani's political activism cannot be reduced to participation in Congress programmes. Her activities encompassed women's education, organisational mobilisation, public speaking, writing, and social reform. Hemjyoti Medhi reconstructs Saikiani's political world through published texts, organisational records, women's activities, and memory. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 1–39*).

The Assam Mahila Samiti created spaces for women to speak publicly, organise meetings, conduct picketing, participate in protest marches, write, perform plays, and develop weaving cooperatives. These activities helped transform the character of the emerging public sphere. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 237–251*).

The weaving programme is particularly revealing. The Mahila Samitis institutionalised women's customary weaving through cooperative activity. Medhi demonstrates how weaving connected women's domestic labour to Swadeshi, khadi, and nation-building. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 115–156*). Thus, women's nationalism cannot be understood solely through marches and arrests. Everyday labour, production, and cultural practices also became political.

Pushpalata Das: Youth, Nationalism and Political Commitment:

Pushpalata Das represents another important strand of Assamese women's nationalism. Her political activity began at a remarkably young age and continued through the later phases of the freedom movement.

Her activism illustrates the importance of students and young people in transforming nationalism into a mass movement. Women did not simply become politically active after marriage or through elite women's organisations; younger women also developed independent political identities.

The significance of Pushpalata lies partly in the continuity of her political commitment. Her involvement with nationalist organisations, constructive programmes, and later political activity demonstrates that the freedom movement could become a lifelong political vocation.

Her career also complicates the conventional distinction between "social reformer" and "political activist." Like Saikiani, she participated in a political culture in which social transformation and national independence were closely connected.

The Quit India Movement and the Transformation of Women's Activism:

The Quit India Movement marked the most dramatic phase of Assamese women's participation. Following the August 1942 resolution, the arrest of major Congress leaders created conditions for decentralised resistance. Anil Kumar Sharma's *Quit India Movement in Assam* devotes a separate section to "Quit India and Student and Woman Movements," beginning on page 111. (*Anil Kumar Sharma, pp. 111–210*).

The character of the movement changed significantly after the arrests. Students and women assumed organisational responsibilities, participated in processions, transmitted information, and maintained resistance networks.

Assam's geographical and administrative structure also influenced this process. Resistance was not confined to Guwahati or other major urban centres. It extended into smaller towns and villages where local activists transformed nationalist slogans into direct action.

This is the context in which the women of Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Nagaon, and other parts of Assam must be situated.

Kanaklata Barua and the Politics of Martyrdom:

Kanaklata Barua has become the most recognisable female symbol of Assam's 1942 movement. She was associated with the Mrityu Bahini, a volunteer organisation connected with the Quit India resistance in the Gohpur area. On 20 September 1942, she participated in an attempt to proceed towards the Gohpur police station with the national flag. She was shot dead by police at the age of seventeen.

Guptajit Pathak's study gives particular attention to Kanaklata, with the relevant section beginning on page 52. (*Guptajit Pathak, pp. 52–70*). Kanaklata's historical significance lies in more than her age or martyrdom. Her death demonstrates the extent to which nationalism had penetrated rural Assamese society. The flag became a symbol of political sovereignty, and the attempt to hoist it at a police station represented a direct challenge to colonial authority.

Yet the emphasis on Kanaklata alone risks turning a collective movement into an individual heroic narrative. Her martyrdom should instead be interpreted as one expression of a much larger political mobilisation involving students, peasants, women, and local volunteers.

Bhogeswari Phukanani and the Politics of an Older Generation:

Bhogeswari Phukanani provides an important contrast to Kanaklata. Where Kanaklata represents youthful nationalist sacrifice, Bhogeswari represents the participation of an older generation of women. Her involvement demonstrates that the political mobilisation of 1942 crossed generational boundaries.

Akunthita Borthakur's scholarship is particularly valuable here because it specifically seeks to recover Guneswari Devi and Bhogeswari Phukanani as "unsung" freedom fighters. Such scholarship is

historiographically significant. It moves beyond the symbolic celebration of a few famous women and investigates the broader social world of local resistance. Bhogeswari's story demonstrates that women's nationalism could emerge from village society and family networks rather than exclusively from formal political organisations.

Guneswari Devi and the Problem of the “Unsung”:

The category of the "unsung freedom fighter" requires careful historical examination. Guneswari Devi's relative absence from mainstream narratives does not necessarily indicate a lack of political importance. Rather, it demonstrates how historical memory is produced.

Women whose activities were conducted through village meetings, local mobilisation, oral communication, and collective protest frequently left fewer conventional documentary traces than male political leaders who produced correspondence, speeches, and organisational records.

The problem is therefore methodological as much as biographical. If historians rely exclusively on official government files, formal Congress records, and published political memoirs, they may systematically underestimate women's participation.

Hemjyoti Medhi's research offers an alternative methodology by combining organisational records with oral histories and memories. (*Hemjyoti Medhi, pp. 252–258*). Women's history therefore requires historians to read against the archive—to examine silences, local memories, oral narratives, organisational records, and commemorative practices.

Tileswari Barua and the Collective History of Dhekiajuli:

The events at Dhekiajuli provide strong evidence against an exclusively hero-centred history of the Assamese freedom movement. During the Quit India Movement, Dhekiajuli witnessed a confrontation between protesters and colonial police. Several participants were killed, including women. Tileswari Barua became one of the female martyrs associated with this episode. Her story, together with those of other local women, demonstrates that political resistance was not simply led by a handful of famous figures. The historical importance of Dhekiajuli therefore lies in its collective character.

Women such as Tileswari Barua and other local participants represented the participation of ordinary people in a political struggle that had become embedded in local society. Dipti Sharma places Dhekiajuli, Gohpur, Nagaon, and numerous women activists within the broader history of the movement. (*Dipti Sharma, pp. 177–296*).

This collective dimension is precisely what is lost when the freedom movement is reduced to biographies of famous leaders.

Women, Violence and Colonial Power:

Women's participation also reveals the coercive character of colonial rule. The nationalist movement is sometimes presented as a largely non-violent moral struggle. Yet the experience of activists on the ground was more complicated. Demonstrations could result in police firing, arrests, lathi charges, imprisonment, and surveillance.

Women's confrontation with colonial power also challenged patriarchal expectations. A woman appearing in a political procession or confronting a police officer was violating both colonial expectations of obedience and indigenous expectations concerning respectable femininity. This dual challenge is central to understanding the historical significance of Assamese women.

Geraldine Forbes's study of women in nationalist India demonstrates that women's participation had

significance beyond numerical strength: it challenged colonial legitimacy and altered prevailing assumptions about women's political roles. (*Geraldine Forbes, pp. 121–156*). The Assamese case reinforces this argument while adding a regional dimension.

Conclusion:

The history of India's independence cannot be adequately written through the biographies of a few celebrated leaders. Assam's experience demonstrates that nationalism was a mass social process in which women played diverse and frequently under-recognised roles. The trajectory from Chandraprabha Saikiani's organisational activism to the mass participation of women during the Quit India Movement reveals a profound transformation in the political status of Assamese women. The Assam Mahila Samiti created organisational spaces; nationalist campaigns created political opportunities; and the repression of 1942 transformed many women from political participants into symbols of sacrifice.

Kanaklata Barua's martyrdom remains one of the most powerful representations of Assamese nationalism, but her history should be placed alongside that of Bhogeswari Phukanani, Guneswari Devi, Tileswari Barua, and numerous other women whose names have not received equivalent national recognition.

The central historiographical argument of this article is therefore that the "unsung" status of these women is not evidence of historical insignificance but evidence of the limitations of conventional historical memory.

Their recovery changes the narrative of India's freedom struggle in two important ways. It demonstrates that the movement was geographically and socially deeper than elite political histories suggest, and it reveals that women were not passive beneficiaries of national liberation. They were active producers of political change.

The enduring legacy of Assamese women freedom fighters consequently lies not only in their sacrifice for India's independence but also in their transformation of the political possibilities available to women. Their courage challenged colonial domination, patriarchal restrictions, and the boundaries between the private and public spheres.

To remember them is therefore not merely to add a few female names to an existing nationalist narrative. It is to rewrite the narrative itself.

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