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QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT AND THE GOHPUR EPISODE OF ASSAM



ABSTRACT: -

Quit India Movement is one of the most important landmarks in the history of freedom movement of India. It was a multi class movement which ushered in a new era in Indian history. Along with the major towns and cities, many small regions, which are generally marginalized also, participated in the Quit India Movement with its own specialty. In Assam along with major pockets of national movement, a small place like Gohpur had contributed largely in the Quit India Movement. A study on contribution in the freedom struggle of India by the people of Gohpur of Assam has yet not been considered as a serious area of research. Therefore, the objective of the study is to trace the role and contributions of the people of Gohpur Sub-division of Assam in the historic Quit India Movement. Historical method has been applied in this study with the help of both primary and secondary sources.

KEY NOTES: Quit India Movement, mass participation, Assam and Gohpur Sub-division.

1. INTRODUCTION

'Bharat Choro' was one of the powerful slogans famous by the name of the 'August Revolution' where the common people of the country demonstrated an

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unparalleled heroism. Moreover, the repression that they faced was the most cruel that had ever been used against the national movement. According to Bipan Chandra why had it become necessary to launch a movement when the possibility of cruel repression was a certainty?¹

The failure of Cripps Mission made a few things very clear to the Congress. It was not a genuine effort of Britain towards granting even Dominion Status, when India was demanding complete independence. It was perhaps the critical stage of the War and the American pressure that needed some 'show' to assuage the national sentiments. It was also transparently visible that the Muslim League was being pampered with assurances to foment communal discord and to widen the Hindu-Muslim divide with the aim to weaken the nationalist movement. Churchill's negative approach towards the granting of liberty, equality and fraternity to India is also responsible for the outbreak of Quit India movement. There was the growing threat of Japanese invasion of India. Gandhiji wanted to save India from that attack and he feared that if the British lost, Japanese might take their place. All these factors led to the Quit India movement in India.

All these factors changed the attitude of Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi, who earlier opposed any mass movement during the World War, again started to think over it. Gandhi realized that the time has come to take some strong and quick actions. He wrote a series of articles in Harijan where he urged the people to rise in action. In order to give effect to Mahatma's views, the Congress Working Committee (C.W.C.) met at Wardha on 14th July, 1942 to discuss Gandhiji's idea of launching a mass movement in the country

demanding the immediate withdrawal of the British power from Indian soil. It adopted a resolution to this effect, which was notified in the AICC session held at Bombay on August, 1942. It also hinted at the launching of a widespread struggle on non-violent lines under Gandhi's leadership in the event of British refusal to quit India.² Accordingly, the Congress Organizations at provincial and district levels were directed to take steps to prepare for the movement and enroll Congress volunteers on a massive scale.

Discussion: Background of the movement in Gohpur sub-division

Assam was noticeably drawn to the national mainstream in 1921, with the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC).³ Gandhi's visit to Assam, in 1921, had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam as well as on the people of Gohpur Sub-division. It caught the imagination of the people who backed it with spontaneous and massive response.⁴ The 1942 upheaval Particularly in Kolabari, Barangabari and Gohpur was spontaneous and disciplined.

It is important to mention that before the start of the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha*, unlike the *Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha*, another socio-political organisation came into existence in 1882 at Tezpur under the name of *Tezpur Rayat Sabha*.⁵ The formation of the *Tezpur Rayat Sabha* can be traced back to the demands of the time. The *Rayat Sabha* virtually came into existence to protest the land settlement policy of Mr. Ward, the commissioner of Assam, and to ventilate the grievances of the people.⁶ The formation and growth of the *Rayat Sabha* was due to the pioneering efforts of some of the prominent persons like Haribilash Agarwala, Lombodor Bora, Lakshmi Kanta Borkakati, Jaidev Sharma Pandit, Thakurdas Sharma.⁷ The *Tezpur Rayat Sabha* heralded an epoch in generating political consciousness among the peoples.⁸

Thus, the *Tezpur Rayat Sabha* prepared the ground to form historic *Rayat Sabha* at Gamiri of Gohpur sub-division. The '*Chaiduar Rayat Sabha*' played an important role in the struggle of the people against the Government machinery. Though, in 1931, during the time of Irwin pact, while delivering speeches at *Chaiduar Sabha* of Gamirighat Session, many prominent leaders were convicted, yet repression of the Government could not suppress the work of these *Sabhas* which continued to function till 1947, the year of Indian Independence when the *Rayat Sabhas* were merged with the Congress.

Regarding the historical background of the movement, it can be said that there was a grand session of the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* under the dynamic leadership of late Jyoti Prasad Agarwala held at Gamiri in May, 1931, which greatly aroused the feelings of nationalism among the people of Gohpur.⁹ *Garamur Satradhikar* late Pitambor Goswami presided over the Conference.¹⁰ Prominent Congress personalities such as late Mahadeb Sarma, Laksmidhar Sarma, Chandra Probha Saikiani, Mahim Chandra Singha, Muktabala Baisnabi, Juwala Prasad Agarwala, Cheniram Das and many others took part in its deliberations and about fifteen thousand (15,000) peoples took part in this historic *Rayat Sabha*. Every section of the society attended in this *Sabha*. Men and women, girls, and boys, youths and students, played a prominent role to make it successful one.¹¹ Batches of young volunteers throughout the days plodded their way to the venue with loads of sundry materials, rice and vegetable. Such activities helped to convey the idea of nationalism in greater spirit to the masses of Gohpur sub-division.

While they did so, some student volunteers from Barangabari sang in chorus some patriotic songs composed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla. Few sporadic lines of Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla's patriotic songs written for this particular occasion are as follows:

*"Saju ha Najowan Saju ha Najowan
Toi Karibo Lagibo Agnisnan
.....
Bukur tezere dhui de aji
Bharatar Apaman!"¹²*

So, this inspiring song sent both Kanaklata Barua and other inhabitants of Gohpur sub-division into a dreamland of joy and aroused a keen sense of Patriotism in their mind.

The versatile Jyoti Prasad Agarwala introduced for the first time an element of novelty in this session of the *Rayat Sabha*, which had never been attempted anywhere in Assam before.¹³ He trained a select batch of boy and girl volunteers to ride on horseback and provide guard of honour to the President elect.¹⁴ These volunteers were wearing white uniform and Gandhi-cap. These volunteers on horseback had profound impression on the masses and such a unique spectacle to the gathering crowd that they were all praised and admired.

The conference was over, when late Mahadeb Sarma, Laksmidhar Sarma, Mahim Chandra Singha and Cheniram Das were prosecuted by the Government for sedition and sent to jail custody. This unwarranted action of the government aroused wide-spread resentment in the whole area of Gohpur sub-division. The fact of this prosecution of the well-known and respected leaders of the people contributed in shaping Kanaklata's attitude against the British rule.

The *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* of Gamirighat session undertook some strict resolutions against the prevalence of untouchability. The leaders and the people who actively participated in this Sabha adopted the most practical means of throwing a direct challenge to the British authority by boycotting British goods and liquor. In short, the Rayat Sabha was the earlier political organization to inspire and enthuse the people regarding socio-political activities. For the first time large sections of the people of Gohpur Sub-division were exposed to nationalist ideas and politics through intense political mobilization in the form of this *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha*. Hence, the part played by this Sabha was immense.

It is well aware to us that British Government had ruled every corners of Assam. Gohpur sub-division was a very remote place at that time. It was surrounded by forest areas and jungles. Road ways were not fully developed at that time. So, for the British the main way of business was sea-route. They mainly transacted their import and export across the Brahmaputra. Moreover, at that time Gohpur sub-division was famous for bamboos and canes, which were very much essential for the British. During the time of World War II, in 1939, the British Government exported the bamboos and canes from Gohpur area to make temporary camps through Gamiri Ghat. Gamiri Ghat was the main river-port used by the British Government, through which entire transaction had done. The British Government transacted their trade from this river port across the Brahmaputra. Thus, the export of bamboos and canes largely contributed to the formation of public opinion against the British activities. In Gohpur sub-division, the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* greatly helped in generating political consciousness amongst the people. Influenced by the national feelings, the local people protested the exportation of bamboos and canes from their native soil. They expressed their anger by breaking all those bamboos and canes over night. These activities of the local peoples of Gohpur sub-division ultimately shows that they were no more wanted to live under the tutelage of British rule.

The non-violent non-cooperation movement was a unique weapon invented by Mahatma Gandhi. The Non-cooperation movement (1920-21) is considered the first mass campaign (side by side Khilafat movement) against the British rule organized by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhiji. The Non-Cooperation movement effected every districts and state of India. Its main objective were boycott of foreign goods, gradual boycott of law courts, boycott of government education institutions and establishing national institutions. Its impact was also falling upon Gohpur sub-division of Assam. Non-cooperation movement served as a background for the people of Gohpur sub-division to take procession against the British activities of establishing opium *mahal*.

During the time of British rule in Gohpur sub-division the local people were very much addicted towards opium. British realized the weak point of local people and started to open *opium mahals* in the different areas of Gohpur sub-division. Their main aim was to divert people's mind from the feelings of nationalism by making them addicted towards opium. These measures adopted by the Government provoked an immediate reaction. Meetings, strikes etc. were organized to protest against such activities of British Government. It was in 1930 that Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati raised their voice against it by visiting every corner of village. They made the people conscious by launching campaign against the use of opium.

Thus, the above mention political environment compelled the inhabitants of Gohpur sub-division to join in the freedom movement of 1942. After the announcement of great Quit India Resolution, every districts of Assam, including Gohpur Sub-division were ready to fight against the exploitative British regime. The people of

Gohpur sub-division finally expressed their anger through this Quit India movement.

HISTORIC MARCH TO GOHPUR POLICE STATION:

The local leaders of Gohpur sub-division comprising the mouzas of Kalangpur, Brahmajan, Halem and Gohpur made secret preparations for the March. Such prominent leaders were Mukunda Kakati, Jonaram Bhuyan, Hema Bhuyan, Jiten Bora, Maghiram Bora, Golok Chandra Pujari, Nirodbaran Das, Chandra Bordoloi, Bhadreswar Kakoti and many others. They paid visits to the villages, enlisted members to the Death squad and organized volunteer force consisting mostly of young men and women and senior Congress workers. The night of 19th September 1942 preceding the day set for the march was a tortured night to many of the prospective participants not because they were afraid of the consequences, but because they were restless to snatch a victory from the most unwilling hands.

It was arranged that the marchers from neighboring and distant villages would assemble at the crossroads at Barangabari in the early morning and march onward to the Gohpur police station towards east. Other batches of volunteers and processionists would also come from Howajan and Kalabari by marching to the same destination towards the west and both the group of processionists would gather in front of the *thana*. The Gohpur police station was the easternmost boundary of erstwhile Tezpur sub-division, which is now falling under Gohpur sub-division.

At last the day 20th September had arrived. At seven o'clock, Kanaklata reached the meeting place at Barangabari from where the procession was to be started. It was a smiling day for all the inhabitants of Gohpur sub-division. Hundreds of participants, young patriots, women, boys and girl, peasants, workers, farmers and laborers from different direction arrived at Barangabari. The congregation was a sight to see; all soldiers of peace gathered with a common purpose and a common destiny. It was an exciting experience for the youngsters. Loyal and obedient, the marchers were determined to carry out the mandate of their leaders and fulfill a noble mission.

The huge crowd or processionists were arranged into long files with a separate row for the women. Kanaklata who arrived at times stood in the forefront of the row of women volunteers and took the national flag in her hands. Someswari Bora, Debalata Barua, Bhugila Bora, Jonaki Gogoi, Punyaprova Barua, and Maichena Barua were a few to stand in the row along with 500 odd women, behind Kanaklata.

Other male volunteers took their positions as assigned to them by their group leaders among whom were Jonaram Bhuyan, Jiten Bora, Minaram Barua, Lakshi Kanta Bora, Thaneswar Mahanta, Maghiram Bora, Giridhar Barua and Karneswar Hazarika, Mukunda Kakati from Dhopabor Congress Committee with his company of volunteers arrived to join the waiting comrades. With the signal given, the procession started moving eastward to Gohpur *thana* at a distance of 7 miles from Barangabari shouting slogans. As the procession proceeded, more and more volunteers from the villages like Balijan, Magani, Brahmajan, Rangalial etc. joined it and it became increasingly bigger. All the people shouting slogans like "Down with British Imperialism", "Swaraj is our Birth Right", "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai", etc. and were singing patriotic songs of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Few lines of such Patriotic songs sung by Processionists are as follows:

(i) *Luitor parore Ami Deka lora*
Moriboloi bhai nai!

.....
Tezere Bolisal
Jamei Bolai,

(ii) *Mrityu Gasoki Ana Joy Jini*
Kori durjoy Abhijan.

Heroic and patriotic song sung in chorus sent wave after wave of joy and aspiration into the heart of the marching volunteers. Instruments like drums, flutes, conch shells and brass-bells were also played all along the

way to Gohpur *thana*. They marched onward forgetting hunger and thirst over a rough and gravel road to Gohpur police station.

The procession before reaching Gohpur *thana*, halted at Purub Bari village. Before resumed their journey the group leaders wanted to ascertain if the mental frame of the volunteers, especially of the members of the Death Squad was in perfect order. They were made aware by the respective team leaders of the dangers likely to be faced by them in front of the *thana* gate. The leaders asked the female volunteers to be behind the line, but Kanaklata strongly opposed this suggestion. She said,

We the girls must not be dismissed so lightly. We are not timid. History is replete with heroic acts of women. Did anybody expect us to live and rule the country when our valiant young men have laid down their lives? Such an idea is repugnant. We will not allow them to die alone. We will do or die together.¹⁵

This was an index to her determination, and patriotism. Kanaklata's reply inspired the minds of thousands of male and female volunteers of the day and made them forget the dangers likely to be faced. Her speech moved the hearts of the volunteers, with courage and determinations.

Refreshed in mind and energized in body, the procession was on the march again. It was about a kilo metre distance to cover and reach the thana. At about 11 a.m. the procession by shouting the slogan 'Do or Die' arrived at the entrance to the western passage leading to the police station. The procession consisting of about 4000 people assembled in front of the police station peacefully. From the opposite direction another procession came from Kalabari, Dubia and Gohpur under the leadership of Golok Chandra Pujari, Nirodbaran Das, Chandra Bordoloi, Mineswar Kakoti, Uma Bordoloi, Bhadreswar Kakati, Rampati Rajkhowa, Thaneswar Bora, Sundar Bora, Mohoram Barua, Hem Kant Mahanta and others and stood at the approach of the eastern passage which was barred to 'intruders' by an iron gate.

Some of the women that were present at that moment were Hemawati Bora, Muhila Dey, Taja Kala Dihingia, Binduprabha Bora, Phuleswari Barman, Kerkeri Gam etc. They increased the women power in the procession. Some other women, still not well known to the people, also joined the procession. They are Soneswari Barua, Chandraprabha Hazarika, Padmeswari Hazarika, Buddheswari Saikia, Jyotimai Rajkhowa, Golaplata Das, Bilati Bhuyan, Kusum Barthakur and others.

CONCLUSION: POLICE FIRING AT GOHPUR

The gate of the Thana was guarded by Rebat Mohan Shome, the Officer-in-Charge (O.C) of the Gohpur *thana* along with his force consisting of 6 armed and 4 unarmed constables. Tapeswar Ojha, Sahabuddin Ahmed, Bogaram Kachari and Golok Singh were a few among those constables. Impatience and overzealousness to pluck the fruit of victory, the procession from the west tried to enter the *thana* by the western gate and the procession of the east tried to enter by the eastern gate. Ignoring the police barricade, the processionists advanced slowly and the two front columns of men and women stood face to face with armed police of the *thana*. Then the Officer-in-charge of the police thana, Reabti Mohan Shome, came out with a band of armed constables and warned the processionists not to advance a step forward.¹⁶ The processionists, votaries of peace and non-violence, pleaded their cause with calm.

In the western gate Kanaklata and some 10 girls were at the head of the procession. She had in her hands the national flag. The people continued to request the O.C to let them go in the police *thana* and hoist the national flag peacefully. But the police, upholders of British prestige, did not give them the permission of entering into the police thana. At this, Kanaklata, stepped forward and appealed to him most politely, "Brother, please make way for us, for we are committed to perform a sacred duty. We are unarmed and wedded to non-violence. We bear no malice towards you. We are all brothers and sisters and have a common mission to fulfill. We shall do our duty peacefully and retire".

Kanaklata's appeals could not soften the attitude of the police officer. Rather the police force stiffened their resistance and assumed a threatening attitude. Kanaklata requested him again, "At least you allow us, the womenfolk, to go in we will not create any trouble we will simply hoist the flag and come out".¹⁷ The O.C. on the other hand replied, "if you advance one step more, we will fire". This threat could not prevent the people from their objective and they did not move a step backward. Kanaklata said again, "you can slay our body not our soul.

If you yet persist in preventing us, we must precede, outcome what may be".¹⁸

Kanaklata reminded the police officer that they were the servants of the people and the *thana* belonged to the people. She said, "Unless the thana officer and his men wanted to act as the servants of the people, they must clear out and allow the people to take possession of the place". Seeing no effect of appeals on the Police officer, Kanaklata said for the last time,

Brother, then you do your duty and let me do mine. One day the nation will say who is right and who is wrong.¹⁹

The swelling crowd of volunteers inched their way onward from behind.²⁰ Then without any provocation or justification the police opened fire on the peaceful, unarmed and disciplined crowd without any warning or dispersal order.²¹ The first round of fire came from the gun of a constable named Bogai Kachari. It was a fatal shot. The bullet pierced through the heart of Kanaklata as a reward for her love for the motherland who slumped to the ground bleeding profusely. Kanaklata died instantly on the spot. Immediately thereafter, a second round was fired severely wounding Mukunda Kakati in the head, a brave young member of *Mrityu Bahini* who came forward to take the place of Kanaklata. This second shooting also wounded Sri Hemakanta Barua, then a mere school boy of sixteen, Khageswar Barua of Balijan, Thuleswar Rajkhowa of Domarpukhuri and Bhola Bordoloi of Kathalanibari who were in the same line with Mukunda Kakati. Jonaki Gogoi of Dubia was wounded while the police hit her on the chest with gun. The dead and the wounded were brought to a safer distance on the trunk road to be attended to and taken care of. The vast crowd that gathered on the two approach roads to the thana and on the N.T. Road on the south could not at first realise and believe that the firing had caused death and injury to some of the volunteers. But, when they saw and heard what had actually happened began to melt away leaving the dead and the wounded to the care of their relatives and friends.

Meanwhile in the midst of confusion that followed the shooting, Rampati Rajkhowa of Kalabari went to the back of the *thana*, scaled up to the roof of the *thana* building with the help of four other volunteers, two of them being Rupeswar Bora and Kaneswar Bhuyan, hoisted the tricolour flag over it to the surprise and admiration of the few onlookers.

The dead body of Kanaklata was taken charge of by the remaining volunteers who carried it back home to Barangabari. Later Mukunda Kakati who expired at about 8 p.m and the wounded Hem Barua were sent under police escort to the Tezpur civil hospital for post mortem examination and treatment respectively. Hem Barua was kept in the hospital for medical care and treatment and to extract the bullets that had lodged in the regions of his chest, neck and shoulder. Some of the bullets which could not be located and pulled out both at the Tezpur civil Hospital and at the Dibrugarh medical college hospital lay imbedded in his body till his death. Mukunda Kakati's dead body after post mortem examination was delivered to the Tezpur Municipal authority for disposal.

Kanaklata and Mukunda Kakati became the martyr and their sacrifice became a source of inspiration for the people of Assam and India.

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