



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VI, Issue-I, July 2017, Page No. 82-86

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Political Participation of Assamese and Manipuri Women during Colonial Period

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Abstract

Indian society has always depicted the picture of a patriarchal form that was marked with the domination of male members and that contributed to the subordination of the position of women in the long run. Right from the beginning of the vedic period, the social structure gradually started taking the form of a more conservative one, women's role was strictly restricted within the four walls of the houses. The early vedic period was a little bit more lenient towards the women folk but after that their position was strictly marginalised due to social conservatism. After the invasion of the Muslim invaders over India the condition worsened to a great extent. It will not be out of place to mention that we do come across characters like that of Rajia Sultana during the sultanate period and Nurjahan during the mughal age who had shown extra-ordinary qualities of leadership and had made such an image that had taken women's status in the society at the peak level., but one thing needs to be mentioned that they all belonged to the privileged classes and there was no change in the condition of those women who belonged to the ordinary classes. But with the beginning of the colonial period in India the whole scenario changed completely during this period certain social reformers came in the forefront and strongly fought for the emancipation of the women.

And from that time onwards the role of women in the political scenario was reflected. The states of Assam and Manipur also could not stay away from this change and in the long run the role of assamese as well as Manipuri women in the political scenario of the states was witnessed in the due course of time.

Here a paper is presented that highlights specifically on the role played by the women of Assam and Manipur during the colonial period and how that had led to the bringing of a great change in their overall status in the political history of the states.

Objectives of Study: This study has been made taking into consideration the status of the women in the indigenous society of the states of Assam and Manipur and the way in which they made their presence felt in the society through their participation in the anti-British movements during the later phases.

The presented paper would enable to attain the following objectives:

1. To highlight on the real status of the women in the Assamese and Manipuri society during the pre-colonial period.
2. To lay emphasis on the way in which certain changes were noticed in their position and social status in the colonial period.
3. Throwing light in the way the phase of national movement brought a great change in the position of the women in Assam and Manipur and marked their participation in the movement in a very special way.
4. Finally to draw a contrast between the status and position of women in the north-east with that of mainland India in the long run.

Introduction: The contribution of women classes in the historical movement or more specifically during the outbreak of the national movement has been greatly witnessed throughout the country during that crucial phase of struggle. In spite of depicting a very conservative picture of the Indian society where the position of women has always been presented in a subordinate way, it has to be stated in a very special way that the colonial period and the phase of the national movement had brought a sudden and tremendous change in the social status of the women and that had even marked the beginning of a new era which had eliminated the age long disparity or the gender discrimination that was existing between the men and women in the society. Broadly speaking the era of Bengal Renaissance and the coming up of certain prominent social reformers in the forefront like that of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy etc. had played pivotal role in bringing extremely positive changes in the status of the women was brought at the peak level with the onset of the national movement in the later phases. The same change was even felt in the north eastern states like that of Assam and Manipur where the participation of women in certain social movements reflected their significant role that they played beyond the boundaries of the four walls of the houses. Right from the days of the pre-colonial times, women were subjected to extreme tortures owing to the conservative outlook of the traditional society. The social norms and practises used to determine the way a woman's life was to be led. The practises of sati, or the child marriage and the rules and regulations outlined for the widows in the society were nothing but the mere reflection of the conservative mind-set of the people who had a pre conceived notion that a woman's life has to be demarcated within the boundaries of such practises. And very similar picture was presented even in the indigenous Assamese society where such conservatism had restricted the participation of women in any form of social movement during the early phase of colonial period. And more specifically women belonging to the upper caste were subjected to more restrictions. In such an environment thinking of the liberty of women folk was beyond imagination. Coming back to the condition that was prevailing in the state of Manipur, there was a little bit of difference in the status of the women in comparison to the state of Assam.

In the traditional Manipuri society although the practices of sati or child marriage did not exist in a concrete way but there was one social evil that had tremendously led to the

marginalised position of the women folk and that evil existed in the form of polygamy. And the Manipuri women had to silently bear that torture since the society strictly depicted the form of patriarchal domination.

But there was one very positive aspect of the traditional 'meetei society' that women folk played a dominant role in the agriculture based economy to a great extent and that was perhaps one of the most important factors that had to some extent made the position of the Manipuri women somewhat independent and in the long run further gave them the strength to fight for their rights and power.

During the phase of the colonial period, these women folk had participated in the anti-colonial movements and were seen in a totally different incarnation.

Analysing Assamese Women's Role in Colonial Period: There was a lot of change in the status and position of Assamese women with the change of period. The early royal period more particularly the Ahom period had witnessed a great disparity in the status of the women belonging to the royal family and those who belonged from the ordinary classes. While privileged section of women enjoyed a luxurious life, common women were subjected to exploitations and tortures. While the indigenous assamese society had certain practises, like that of the child marriages and the strict restrictions for the widows had led to the marginalised position of the women. But a great change was witnessed when the impact of Bengal Renaissance was strongly felt throughout the state. The coming of certain social reformers like that of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and their new thoughts and ideas had instantly effected the status and position of Indian women and Assam was also effected by that change.

The phase of national movement had marked the outburst of many anti-colonial agitations and that was the most crucial phase in the history of emancipation of the women. Gandhiji's new thoughts and call that there is no distinction based on gender, had in a way paved the future course of events in which mass participation of women was noticed. With the foundation of Assam Women's Association, in 1915 the participation of women folk in the anti-colonial movement in Assam became inevitable. In other words the national movement marked the liberation of the women folk. Some of the leading ladies who came in the forefront during that period were Snehjanta Bhattacharjee, Dharmada Devi, Girija Devi, and above all Chandra Prova Saikiani who was not only a mere freedom fighter but was a very well-known woman activist of Assam. The colonial phase even marked the spread of modern education among the women of Assam that further intensified their participation in the political movements. The non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 had in a very special way marked the partition of the women folk at the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi in Assam.

Some of the prominent women activists of Assam had not only played dominant role in the political sphere but at the same time through their bold writings had created a strong foundation that used to inspire other women. Nalinibala Devi, daughter of prominent Assamese political activist Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, was one of the most influential women

of those days who had come out of her privileged position and immensely worked for the emancipation of women folk in Assam. Her thoughts and ideologies were reflected through her writings.

Indeed the conservative assamese society that had always tried to marginalise the position of women by considering her docile and dependent on a man for her identity had undergone tremendous change during the colonial phase. How can someone forget the great martyr of Assam, Kanaklata who had come out of the age old thoughts of conservative society and sacrificed her life for the sake of the nation in 1942.

Manipuri Women and their Role during Colonial Period: The role of women in Manipur was dominantly witnessed in the agricultural sector as well as in the indigenous handloom industrial sector. Besides that a market that was more famous by the name of “**KHWAIRAMBAND BAZAR**” was solely controlled by the women folk . Such sort of role in the economic sphere had given them the courage to fight against the colonial exploitation and that was reflected with their participation and role they had played in the two women’s movement which are more famous in the historical pages as the great ‘**NUPILAN MOVMENT**’ of 1904 and 1939. The very first movement started in the year 1904 and was mainly focused to fight against the colonial maladministration and the misrule that was started after the British had brought the state of Manipur under indirect colonial administration since 1891 onward During the phase of the movement the act of burning down the prominent women’s market of the state the **Khwairamband bazar** had instantly ignited the fire of agitation as the said market was the prominent commercial spot that was the only one in the state which was fully managed by the women folk, so the participation of women was of course inevitable. Prominent women leader who had intensely taken part in the agitation were, Ongbi Sanajaobl Devi, Ongbi Dhabali Devi, Ningol Juboti Devi, and Kwathabi Devi. The participation of the women folk gave instant courage to the male members who were equally involved with the agitation. Although the duration of the movement was not that much long but it had made a great impact on the economic and political scenario of the state and had paved the way for future anti-colonial agitations.

In the next phase of the colonial era in Manipur again for the second time the participation of women folk was witnessed in the year 1939 with the outbreak of the second women’s agitation. Mainly the second women’s agitation of 1939 in Manipur was strictly started to oppose the policy of ‘rice export’ in which huge quantity of grain was usually supplied to the nearby located British outposts at Kohima and Assam. But this policy drastically created the situation of artificial scarcity of food grains in the local market. In order to oppose this cruel policy the women folk had instantly started their agitation in 1939 in a vigorous way. A very special mention has to be made about one women agitator – Aribam Chaobiton Devi who had created a small group of four or five women who were entrusted with the task of stopping the carts that used to carry grains to the British outposts. The movement was quite peaceful at the initial stages, but with the gradual passage of time it turned out to be violent. And at many places a hard scuffle was witnessed between the

colonial forces and women folk. Although the movement gradually lost its grip after the arrest of the prominent women leaders but it will not be out of place to mention that the impact of the movement was felt in every aspect of the life of people of Manipur.

Conclusion: Finally while over viewing the whole scenario and particularly talking more about the position of women in the north eastern states this will not be an exaggerated statement to mention that to some extent the position of women in these states were placed in an advantageous position. The inhuman practise of sati system or female infanticide that was more common in the other parts of the country, was never practised in the states of the north-east. Although instances of child marriage, was quite common in the assamese society but had undergone a great change with the beginning of the colonial period that had practically witnessed the spread of western education and was marked with the strong spirit of nationalism which brought the women folk on the forefront.

Gender discrimination was to a great extent eliminated during the British period and particularly the women folk of the states of Assam and Manipur had made the presence felt in a very special way, where they were never viewed as the marginalised faction of society.

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